# what's so great about now?

**CYNTHIA THATCHER** tells us why the present moment isn't all it's cracked up to be.

**"BE MINDFUL."** "Stay in the present." "Bare attention." We've all heard one of these phrases. And if you're more experienced in insight practice, these may be the watchwords that chime in the back of consciousness from morning till night, reminding you that everything genuine in the spiritual path is to be found in the now.

But then one day you're sitting in meditation, trying to observe the rise and fall of the abdomen, or a thought, or pain, and it all seems terribly dreary. Suddenly a question floats like a bubble to the surface of your mind: "What's so great about the present moment, anyway?"

Casting about for an answer, you think vaguely of seeing the beauty you've been missing (although nothing seems beautiful right now), or enlightenment (which is what, exactly?) or simply gaining more peace and happiness. You're not sure how those good things occur as a result of staying in the now—here you squirm a bit—and yet, imagining some golden light in the distance, you feel that if only your mind could stay in the present, things would get better. Better how? Well, just . . . better. Happier.

Alas. Although we may be thoroughly versed in the method of mindfulness practice, our clarity sometimes fails when it comes to stating why the now is worthwhile. Yet we needn't sweep the issue under the rug or be satisfied with a vague answer. It warrants serious thought because, unless we're clear about what the present is, it will be easy to abandon the practice of mindfulness when experience doesn't match expectation.

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Fourteen years ago, during my first meditation retreat with Achan Sobin Namto, this question came up full force. I was a new student, in the first week of a three-and-a-half-month retreat. Achan Sobin, a Thai Buddhist teacher, had more than thirty years' experience teaching meditation.

"How do you feel?" he asked me. He'd just finished the evening chanting; the burning incense sticks made three glowing points in the otherwise dim room. Despite his kindness, desolation hung on me like a cape. "I'm having doubts," I said. He grasped the nature of the doubt instantly. It wasn't my ability that I questioned, or the teachings, or the practice method itself. It was the bleakness I experienced when staying in the now. Fundamentally, was the present even worth staying in? Somehow, Achan knew my thoughts. "There's nothing good in the present moment, right?" he asked,

*Cement Dock*, Jimmy and Dena Katz, 2005

hooting with laughter until his eyes teared up. Apparently this cosmic joke struck him as hilarious, though I didn't find it particularly funny. He was glad I was on the right track. I was beginning to find out what all meditators were supposed to see: the First Noble Truth that every moment of samsara, every blip of mind (*nama*) and matter (*rupa*), was unsatisfactory (*dukkha*).

something quite specific—the ultimate characteristics common to all formations, good or bad. There are only three of these: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-selfness. (Note that beauty isn't among them.) Mindfully noting mental and physical phenomena, we learn that they arise only to pass away. In the deepest sense, we cannot manipulate or actually own them.

## The present moment, it turned out, wasn't wonderful at all.

Yet Achan's response startled me. Hadn't I read that when you placed your full attention in the moment, you'd finally notice all the beauty you'd been missing? Wouldn't the plum taste sweeter? Wouldn't the bare winter branches (now that you weren't too distracted to actually see them) thrum with radiance against the no-longer-bleak gray sky? But he'd confirmed that the now wasn't all it was cracked up to be. I sighed. So the plum wasn't going to get sweeter. The present moment, it turned out, wasn't wonderful at all.

The current myth among some meditation circles is that the more mindful we are, the more beauty we'll perceive in mundane objects. To the mind with bare attention, even the suds in the dishpan—as their bubbles glint and wink in the light—are windows on a divine radiance. That's the myth. But the truth is almost the opposite: in fact, the more mindfulness we have, the less compelling sense-objects seem, until at last we lose all desire for them.

It's true that strong concentration can seem to intensify colors, sounds, and so forth. But concentration alone doesn't lead to insight or awakening. To say that *mindfulness* makes the winter sky more sublime, or the act of doing the dishes an exercise in wonder, chafes against the First Noble Truth.

This myth points to a misunderstanding of the role of mindfulness. Mindfulness, accompanied by clear comprehension, differs from ordinary awareness. Rather than seeing the conventional features of objects more clearly, mindfulness goes beyond them to perceive

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These traits are unwelcome—unsatisfactory. So the more mindfulness one has, the clearer *dukkha* becomes.

But sitting there with Achan Sobin, staring at the glow from the incense sticks, I felt vaguely cheated by something I couldn't put my finger on. Had some perverse trick been played on the world? Ironically, having begun meditation in an effort to be free of suffering, I was now seeing more unsatisfactoriness—and rightly so, according to my teacher. Then why cultivate mindfulness? Why stay in the present at all? But rejecting mindfulness out-of-hand wasn't the answer. Since Achan was the lightest, most carefree person I'd ever known, I wanted to be like him, to follow the technique that had apparently brought him such ease.

**THE GORDIAN KNOT** needed untangling. And why not approach it in a rigorous manner, strand by strand? A scientist might first analyze the material in question, which in this case was the present moment itself.

So we might begin by asking: Of what is the present moment actually composed? There is a system of Buddhist metaphysics called Abhidhamma, in which we learn that our day-to-day experience can be broken down into units called "mind-moments." These moments are the smallest bits of consciousness—the quarks of the mental world.

Each moment is composed of two parts: consciousness and one object—not a watering can or a thimble, but an object of the mind. Consciousness is always aware of something. When a patch of azure bursts into

our field of awareness, a blip of eye-consciousness sees the color. When a smell wafts toward us, another blip of consciousness knows the scent. Only mind and object; that's all there is to it. Our entire lives are nothing but a chain of moments in which we perceive one sight, taste, smell, touch, sound, feeling, or thought after another. Outside of this process, nothing else happens.

Now, what about the objects themselves? There are six types in all: sounds, colors, smells, tastes, touches, and mental objects. Consciousness perceives them via different sensory "doors." A sight, for instance, is cognized at the eye-door. Mental objects are perceived through the mind-door directly. They include, among others, thoughts, concepts, feelings, and emotions.

## how long is a moment?

IN THE PRACTICE OF VIPASSANA we try to stay in "the present moment." Everyone knows what the "present" means: Now. But what, precisely, is a "moment"? How long does it last? And when does the present moment become the past?

In Vipassana the word "moment" has two definitions. The first could be called the "practice-moment." ("Practice" refers, of course, to meditation practice.) The second is the moment of consciousness itself.

The length of the practice-moment is determined by the object. For instance, when you touch the toe to the floor in the walking exercise, that is one practice-moment; but it's shorter than the act of moving the foot forward. As soon as you complete a step, that moment is over. If you continue thinking about it, you've strayed away from the present. What is the present? Only the object that's arising right now. We could say that the practice-moment is the length of time you focus on an object before letting it go and moving on to the next one. A single practice-moment is about one to three seconds long. It varies depending on the form you're observing.

The moment of consciousness, the second definition, refers to one mind-moment (*cittakkhana*) arising and disappearing. The rate of this moment is incredibly fast and doesn't vary. A moment of consciousness is the smallest unit by which we can "measure" ultimate reality. A single one of these blips is millions of times shorter than a two-second practice moment. These mind-moments are appearing and vanishing one by one all the time, whether or not we recognize them.

It is possible for the meditator to progress from observing the first kind of moment to seeing the second. As mindfulness gets sharper and faster, the student begins to bridge the gap between the practice-moment and the moment of consciousness. When that happens, the meditator might focus on one walking step, for example, and perceive several moments arising and passing away before the movement of the foot is finished. Like a meteor zipping across the sky, there might be a sense of great speed as mindfulness sees something in a split second. The meditator may find that, as soon as he focuses on anything, it bursts and dissolves immediately. The moments become shorter as mindfulness is able to "cut" things faster.

When mindfulness is quick enough, the student will experience the moment of consciousness itself. He will see one mind-moment arising and vanishing in clear detail. This is to witness the truth of experience, undistorted by delusion. It is a glimpse of ultimate reality. He then understands one of the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, or impersonality. This understanding is an immediate vision, not a thought.

The aim of Vipassana practice is to make one mindful enough to perceive a single moment of consciousness arising and disappearing. One need only experience three or four such moments in a row in order to reach enlightenment. Indeed, even perceiving one moment of ultimate reality is a great boon for the meditator. It's said that such an experience, by which meditator attains the level called "lesser streamwinner" (*culla-sotapanna*), will continue to give benefit for three successive lifetimes.

–C. T.

These six main objects are all that we can know. No matter how wildly adventurous our lives are, we still can't experience anything other than these half-dozen forms. Since mind and object are the only building blocks from which a moment of life can be fashioned, there is nothing else that could possibly take place in the now.

Once we know what the present moment comprises, the next question is: Are these components delightful and lovely? We often think that images, smells, and so on can be wonderful. And in the mundane sense, they can. We take delight in the scent of jasmine or the glimpse of a red sun over the mountains—but this pleasure is entangled with delusion. We think sense-impressions desirable only because we can't see beyond the conventions to their real characteristics.

Take the sunset: What happens when we see it? Ultimately, we don't. When the eye contacts a visual form, we merely see color, not a three-dimensional thing. In fact, the tint, along with the consciousness seeing it, dies out in a split-second, but we fail to catch the dissolve. Why? Because delusion blurs the separate moments of perception together, making experience look seamless. After the color sparks out, subsequent moments of consciousness replay the image from memory, dubbing it "sunset." This process takes only a fraction of a second. Nevertheless, by the time we name it, the original image is already gone. "Sunset" is a concept perceived through the mind-door, not the eye. We mistake this product of mental construction for something irreducibly real. Without the tool of mindfulness the trick is too fast to see, like trying to catch the separate frames of a running film.

The deception ends in disappointment—as if we believed a necklace to be priceless, then learned that the gems were paste. The Buddha said, *Sabbe sankhara anicca:* All formations are impermanent and therefore unsatisfactory, even the ones that seem heavenly. He didn't add the footnote: "Psst! Some formations are wonderful."

**NOW, IF ALL FORMATIONS** are unsatisfactory in the ultimate sense, then so must be the ones that make up the present moment. But again we ask, if the now is so far from wonderful, why stay in it? Note the difference between saying "The present moment is wonderful" and "It's wonderful to stay in the present." This is more than a semantic quibble. The first statement implies that the bare sensory data occurring in the present are themselves little bits of divinity. The second allows that, by staying in the now, one can be free from the distress that comes from clinging to those sensations.

In fact, the Buddha clearly stated the reason for practicing mindfulness: to uncover and eliminate the cause of suffering. That cause is desire. When its cause is absent, suffering cannot arise. At that point, the sutras tell us, one knows a happiness with no hint of anxiety to mar it. But that isn't because sights and sounds magically become permanent, lovely, and the property of Self. Rather, these impressions temporarily cease and consciousness touches a supramundane object called "nibbana," the unconditioned element. Although a mental object, nibbana, the "highest bliss," is not a formation at all; it is unformed and permanent. So the present moment is worthwhile because only in it can we experience nibbana—complete freedom from suffering.

Nowhere did the Buddha advocate mindfulness for the sake of appreciating the warmth of soapy water, the brightness of copper kettles, and so on. On the contrary, he called it a "perversion of view" (*vipallasa*) to regard what is ultimately undesirable as worthwhile or beautiful.

Yet can't sense-impressions be pleasurable? Yes, but pleasure isn't the unending source of happiness we take it to be. In daily life we perceive beautiful sensations as solid and relatively lasting, when in fact they're only unstable vibrations that fall away the instant they form. Like cotton candy that dissolves before you can sink your teeth into it, pleasure doesn't endure long enough to sustain happiness.

But since ignorance conceals impermanence, we react by grasping and pushing away, which agitates the mind. The very act of clinging causes mental distress—have you ever noticed that longing *hurts?* Moreover, the exertions are futile since grasping cannot extend the life of pleasure, not even by a nanosecond. As for unpleasant sensations—in truth, they disappear in a moment, too. But when you feel averse to them, the pain doubles. It's like trying to remove a thorn in your foot by piercing the skin with a second thorn. If we could let go, the mind wouldn't suffer.

The Buddha discovered that the happiest mind is the nonattached one. This happiness is of a radically different order than what we're used to. When asked how there could be bliss in nibbana, since it *(continued on page 114)*

*(continued from page 37)* offers no lovely sights or sounds, Sariputta, the Buddha's chief disciple, said: "That there is no sensation *is itself happiness.*" Compared with this joy, he implied, pleasure falls woefully short. We read in the sutras that "everything the world holds good, sages see otherwise. What other men call 'sukha' (pleasure) that the saints call 'dukkha' (suffering) . . ." (*SN* 3.12). This isn't just an alternative viewpoint—it's ultimate reality.

As paradoxical as it sounds, we can only find this genuine happiness by first understanding that the present moment of mind and body is unsatisfactory. By progressing through the stages of insight—experiencing fear, then weariness, then dispassion when noting phenomena—we can give up attachment, the real cause of distress. The more clearly we see the lack of worth in mental and physical sensations, the less desire we'll have for them until, thoroughly disenchanted, craving will be snuffed out automatically. As soon as that occurs, pure happiness will arise by itself.

But if we keep searching for more beauty in the sights and sounds themselves, how can we see them clearly? How can we become dis-illusioned and quell the fires that keep us agitated?

**IMAGINE THAT YOU AND SOME FRIENDS** are trapped in a burning house. Chunks of flaming wood keep dropping from the ceiling. Would it be better to acknowledge the danger and help the others escape, or to stay and search for beauty: "Look, it's not really so bad. The mauve cast to those flames is quite lovely. . . "?

Likewise, we should mindfully observe dukkha in the present moment because that's the only staircase out of the burning house, the house of the *khandhas* (the five aggregates: matter, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness), in which we're trapped. That's not a well-received view. But is it better to ignore the message, to plop down on the stairs with a shrug? Not acknowledging the danger, we're in far worse straits. Seeing it, we can negotiate an escape.

Not that we'll develop long faces. Buddhists recognize suffering in order to be free of it, not to wallow in it. Ask yourself this: Is it "wallowing" to tell those in danger that the house is on fire? The great news is that


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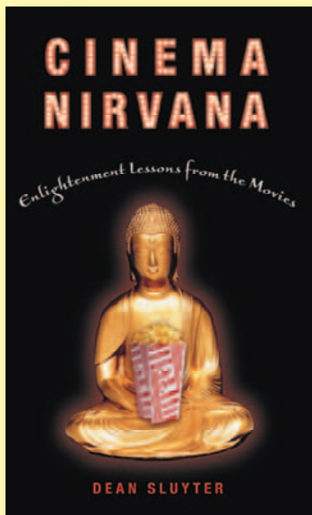


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anyone who follows the Eightfold Path to the end is guaranteed to attain nibbana. Who wouldn't be glad to know that unalloyed happiness is possible? Indeed, most of us aim much lower than that.

Mindfulness practice does lead to happiness, but not because the *stuff* of the mundane now—its sights, sounds, and the consciousness that knows them—turns out to be better than we'd thought. Despite the myth, bare attention doesn't expose some hidden core of radiance in the empty vibrations; no such core exists.

When the components of mundane existence are themselves unsatisfactory, can we reasonably hope to fashion happiness from them? That's like trying to weave a white rug from black wool. So, rather than frantically looking for loopholes in the teachings, isn't it wiser to accept that mindfulness won't make the plum any sweeter or the kettle any brighter? But here's the hopeful part—the more we practice mindfulness, the less we'll care about sweetness or brightness. Once we have a superior substitute, the traits that are compelling now will interest us less and less. This is not numb indifference but true liberation. We'll have learned the great secret that nonattachment is a lightness and freedom complete in itself, separate from the impressions pouring in through the sense-doors. Imagine it. We'd no longer need certain sights or touches to feel at ease.

Nor would we feel depressed due to others. Although we may not understand it yet, once we've tasted this freedom we'll treasure it more than the most delightful sensation we can think of—the fragrance of linden trees, the notes of a Chopin prelude, or the pleasure of making love. We may continue to experience these and other pleasant sensations. But we won't grasp at each sight or touch when it ends, and therefore won't suffer from the loss.

Now comes the tough question: Do we honestly seek liberation from the dreary rounds of dukkha? Then let us be mindful, not to imbue the pan of suds with a fabricated beauty, but for the reason the Buddha intended: to see the distress of clinging until we behold the real plum—nibbana. The enlightened ones have sung it in many ways: When the mind's object is nibbana, the present couldn't be more wonderful. ▼

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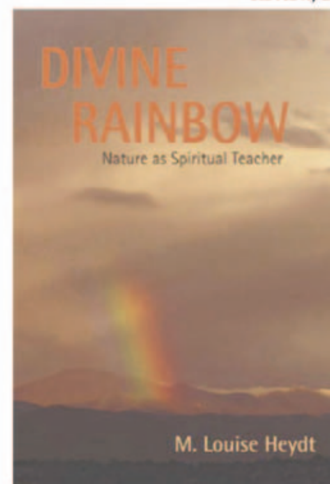


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