

MIND-FULL-NESS is an interesting term which, when you stop and think about it, begs several questions; what is it that causes our mind to be full? Is having a full mind a good thing? Was our mind full when we were born or does living-life fill it up? Or is mindfulness a process and not a cerebral collection of nouns, or perhaps it is nothing at all?

So many times when we are faced with paradoxical, it-depends, types of questions, and in order to arrive at a place that makes sense, it is important to ‘un-fill’ our mind, but not in a literal sense, like emptying a bucket of water and then just quit thinking – besides, being mind-empty is a whole different discussion.

So when it comes to the idea of mindfulness, Buddhism is the logical place to start. Zen master and UU minister, James Ishmael Ford, writes, ... (impossible questions are...) always beckoning... and (because beckoning is eternal, and we are almost always drawn into the ensuing conversation, we can understand this process as a) spiritual endeavor.

We can learn more about this assertion from the Ancient Chinese Story,
‘Which is the True Ch’ien?’

Many many years ago, there were two children raised together, a girl Ch’ien and a boy, Chau. They were cousins being raised by Ch’ien’s father, Kien, who was also Chau’s uncle. The children were constant childhood companions and one day Kien said to them, “You two are perfect together. When you grow up, you will be married.” The children let these words soak in and they both decided it was true: so they considered themselves as betrothed to one another. Unlike most childish thoughts which fade away like a morning mist, Ch’ien and Chau never wavered from their assumption that someday they would marry.

Of course life rarely goes as we expect, so as they grew into young adulthood, and as was the custom of that ancient culture, Ch’ien’s father, arranged for Ch’ien to be married to a wealthy merchant. The young couple was devastated and Chau decided he couldn’t bear to see his beloved Ch’ien wedded to someone else so he decided to leave home forever. Chau acquired a boat, and the night before the wedding, he set off down river without a word to anyone.

He wasn’t gone more than three or four minutes when he heard Ch’ien calling to him. Peering into the evening light, he saw her running down the bank of the river, her skirts rippling in the breeze. He pulled over to the shore and Ch’ien climbed into the boat and they sailed away together.

They married and settled in the province of Chuh and after six happy years and the birth of two children, Ch’ien said to her husband, “I have to go home and make peace with my father.” Chau understood, feeling many of the same longings as his beloved, and so agreed. They arranged for the care of their children with friends and sailed back upstream to their old home.

When they moored, Ch’ien stayed in the boat while Chau went up to the house to ascertain what their reception would be. He knocked on the door and Ch’ien’s father, Kien, answered it. “Oh, how wonderful to see you!” the old man exclaimed, “I’ve

worried about you and what has happened to you.” In violation of all cultural standards, he embraced the young man as if his lost son had returned home.

Chau was embarrassed, and replied, “Thank you, sir. I’ve missed you too. But I really didn’t expect such a greeting.”

“Why not?” Kien asked, “I raised you as my son. I’ve missed you more than I can say.” Then Chau said, “But, since I ran away with Ch’ien, I thought you would be terribly angry.”

The old man stepped back and stared at his nephew. “What are you talking about, Ch’ien is here.

The night you left, she went to bed and has been in a coma ever since. Of course, there never was a wedding. I’ve often thought that I should have let you two marry instead. Come.”

The two went into the house and, sure enough, in a darkened bedroom, there was Ch’ien, terribly pale, and obviously in a feverish sleep.

“I don’t know what to say, but I have to show you something,” Chau said to his uncle. Together the two men walked down toward the river. They were about halfway there when Ch’ien appeared. She was flushed and walking fast and seemed not to see the two men at all, but instead was looking at something behind them.

They turned around and saw the other Ch’ien, fevered and pale as silk, walking rapidly toward the river. Frightened, Chau and Kien stood aside as the two Ch’iens ran up to each other and embraced, then they melted into one another, somehow becoming one person.

In the Zen tradition, a parable, or riddle, or a story that teaches us something is referred to as a koan. A koan is a question about ultimate things which also holds the answer about ultimate things. The eleventh-century Zen master, Wu-tsu Fa-yen took the story of Ch’ien and Chau and turned it into a koan when he asked, “The woman Ch’ien and her spirit separated. Which is the true Ch’ien?”

For human purposes, this is a really good story because it embodies familiar archetypes which get passed along through the ages. We learn from a story when it elicits good questions, and the ensuing discussion, hopefully, helps us understand ourselves and each other better. The archetypes of two young lovers, disapproving parents, and mystical death were used 1500 years later just as effectively by William Shakespeare when he wrote his classic story, *Romeo and Juliet*.

There are several ways to teach ourselves how stories create insights about life, death and everything in-between. I learned to explicate stories when I went to college and studied English: technical terms and processes, archetypes, parallelism, simile and metaphor, syntax, and using transformational grammar to diagram sentence structure.

When I went to seminary, I studied Zen Buddhism with the Reverend James Ishmael Ford, who taught me about koans, and to be honest, I kind of like the Buddhist approach better; probably because explicating a really good story, finding the koan if you will, is more fun than

diagramming sentences – even though finding the most deeply embedded sentence is kind of like finding a good koan – but I digress.....

Another lens of understanding we can use to ask good questions and seek good answers also comes from the Buddhist tradition --- the image of a huge cosmic net.

Perhaps you have heard of *Indra's Net*, a beautiful cosmic creation made of (in my mind) glistening strands, and at each intersection where the wide spaces between the strong silken strands is linked, there is a multi-faceted mirror with sides as smooth and polished as a perfectly cut diamond. When we think about ourselves as a collection of reflections, we can begin to understand that all we know of ourselves is what has been reflected back to us from the facets of other mirrors – from other people and visa-versa.

I really like the analogy of Indra's Net because it works on so many levels. Even though each person exists within their own body, like a mirror, the first thing a newborn sees is another human's face. There is so much raw power in those first moments of life – smiles, joyful tears, overflowing love and happiness. The Dalai Llama described it this way, "Once an individual emerges out of the great mystery, questions of identity and purpose and direction spill out in a great torrent."

From the beginning of human time, and as each person's life story unfolds, the core questions remain the same: Who am I? Why am I here? What does it mean to be human? What is the source of ultimate meaning and how do I live a life filled with peace, happiness and a sense of purpose? --- which is one important reason we create and tell stories, especially those ending with the question, *and the moral of the story is...?*

In one sense, to be a mindful person is to not be afraid of the answer, "all of the above." Science has taught us the human brain is hard-wired to encounter complexity and simplify it. This is the work of linguists: studying how words are organized, experienced, and then applied.

When a story or a parable or even a riddle, points us toward deeper insight and awareness, our brain is drawing upon memories and hopes – points of light, if you will, which are stored inside our body. When these points of light, consciously or unconsciously, interact with what is going on outside of our bodies, on a basic level, we are able to make meaning by quietly pondering, discussing with others, or for some, writing, making music, or art, or performance.

The prophets and wise ones understand this meaning-making process is more than nuts and bolts; it multi-faceted, relationship-dependent, and expected outcomes are not always predictable.

So take the story of Ch'ien and Chau for example.... and the questions it creates and which beckon and draw us into conversation.

When Ch'ien's father told the young playmates they were destined to be married, why did the children believe him and then never question him? Would they have had the same relationship if the father had never said that?

What happens when parents impose cultural norms on their children, just because ...? Do children always rebel and, if so, what forms does rebellion take? What if they don't rebel?

What really happens to a person when their heart gets broken? What makes the story of the prodigal son an enduring archetype? What is the nature of death – can it be more than just physical? Are humans truly spiritual beings? What is the nature of spirituality? What is the nature of love? As she lived happily as a wife and mother, why did Ch'ien still long to be reconciled with her father? Does this type of longing speak to the circular nature of life or to an inherent need for health in all aspects of our life?

You get the picture, a good story elicits good questions and, in so doing, points us to deeper understanding.

The story of Ch'ien and Chau not only beckons us to deeper understanding, it is a perfect example of how, even though we live in individual bodies, so much of our understanding comes from our relationships with other people – those millions of internalized reflections, transforming and shaping our sense of self.

As our own life story unfolds, the core questions remain the same: Who am I? Why am I here? What does it mean to be human? What is the source of ultimate meaning and how do I live a life of happiness and sense of purpose?

A rich and multi-faceted experience of life, the stories we tell ourselves, and the questions and answers we engage add up to all-of-the-above, and taken as a whole, can be overwhelming -- no wonder our minds are so often filled to the brim!

One of the things I have realized about 'mindfulness' as part of a spiritual practice, is, first and foremost, you must trust your brain.

No matter if you faithfully set aside time every single day to practice high quality meditation or zazen, mindful and focused sitting, any amount of time you devote to calming your mind, focusing on your breath, and just sitting is always beneficial; because by letting go of our propensity to control, we move into trust. The essence of meditation is trusting your mind to do what it does best – assimilate and transform. After you have calmed your monkey mind, or poured the water out of the bucket, the great secret of successful meditation or sitting zazen is trusting your brain, period.

To disengage the ego and direct your mind's eye onto a cloudless blue sky is the first step. Then focusing on each breath in its entirety, breath in 2.3.4.5 – breath out 2.3.4.5, is the fundamental state of mindfulness. When you reach this state, the magic that is your brain happens!

When we trust our own internal hardwiring, then all of the above:

the worries, the hopes, the tasks at hand, the planning, the memories, the physicalness, and processing all-of-the above are handed over to the brain. When we master these basic steps, mindfulness becomes a natural state of mind, thereby informing every moment and every task we encounter throughout the day.

The Dalai Lama teaches,

“Developing the mind depends upon a great many internal causes and conditions, much like (the construction and operation of) a space station depend on the work of generations of scientists ... Neither a space station nor an enlightened mind can be realized in a day.

Similarly, spiritual qualities must be constructed through a great variety of ways. However, unlike the space station ...reading someone else's blueprint of mental progress will not transfer its realizations to you. ...As you gradually internalize techniques for developing morality, concentration of mind, and wisdom, untamed states of mind become less and less frequent. You will need to practice these techniques day by day, year by year. As you transform your mind, you will transform your surroundings Others will see the benefits of your practice of tolerance and love and will work at bringing these practices into their own lives.

When we come to understand that mindfulness, that awareness that all-of-the- above, is what life is really all about, is to understand living life is a spiritual endeavor and that it is really a pretty good story.