Allopathic Mindfulness Vs. Yogic dhyAna



Posted on March 28, 2017 by Raghu Ananthanarayanan

The newest game in Leadership and management seems to be ‘Mindfulness’. There is a lot of research that is getting published, and most of it focuses on CEO’s and how they benefit from 20 minutes of mindfulness practice. I am sure every member of the organization will gain immensely from its practice.

One of the most delightful taxi rides I have ever had was one in which the taxi driver was calmness personified as he drove through particularly unruly traffic. It turned out that he was a regular meditator. I remember commenting about his attitude, “You have to handle this every day for long hours” I said. A very interesting discussion ensued on how important it is for a person to go back home after a difficult days work in a state of mind where he can smile at his wife and play with his children. “Yoga and *dhyAna* are indispensible for me” was his final statement. He practiced prANAyAma to prepare himself for the rigours of the day and also as soon as he finished his workday, he kept repeating a *japa* whenever we stopped at

traffic lights!

I am delighted that an ancient Indian practice is getting the attention it deserves. I have no doubt at all that all the research done by Jon Kabat-Zinn and others on the Buddhist meditators from Dalai Lama's senior monks is excellent work. However, a few tendencies worry me.

Firstly, there is a presentation of 'mindfulness' as if it is 'the active ingredient'. This is reminiscent of the way Pharmaceutical companies study many traditional healing practices and preparations and analyze the herbs used to extract the one chemical that is the essential curative element. This chemical is then patented, synthesized in a factory, and the future then belongs to that company's top line! When we look at '*dhyAna*' or '*anapAnasati*' the original practices that were studied, we find that they are part of a holistic set of practices and worldview. 'Mindfulness' is starting to sound like a pill that has been distilled out of the original messy mix.

Let me illustrate: *dhyAna* is one of the 'eight limbs' of Yogic discipline. These limbs are accepted by all Indian Spiritual teachings. The worldview that characterises both Yogic and Buddhist thought for example, make attentiveness, contemplation and meditation a central practice of a life that is directed towards spiritual attainment. Householders, Kings, Monks and people from all walks of life who valued the spiritual path practiced a form of meditation that was meaningful to them. *DhyAna* is not a 'detachable fragment'! It has been recognised that when the 'active agents' are separated from the holistic herbal preparations there are 'side effects' that the whole herb does not create. Often the herb is part of a dietary regimen and is itself an integral part of a holistic treatment. One wonders what the side effects would be of practicing 'mindfulness the pill'.

Secondly, the idea that a human being is part of Nature is central to the worldview out of which the contemplative practices have grown. What happens when this idea is plucked out of its nutrient medium and placed, often sold, as a tool for effectiveness? IMHO, *dhyAna* is a practice that ought to lead to the development of ecologically sensitive and sustainable ways of deploying science and technology. Mindfulness as it is promoted will make many executives who do not wish to ask the difficult questions regarding their motivations, the impact of their business on the environment, on equity and the like more 'effective'. This is because these practices that definitely make ones mind more sharp and retentive are placed in a context that values 'utilitarianism' as its defining characteristic.

Thirdly, 'Mindfulness' is presented almost as if it is a modern discovery. If one reads Wikipedia (popularly seen as the arbiter of truth!) one comes across this line: "a famous

exercise, introduced by Kabat-Zinn in his MBSR-program, is the mindful tasting of a raisin, in which a raisin is being tasted and eaten mindfully", now this was something that Thich Nhat Hanh has often written about. Mindful eating and the psychological correlates of the 'six *rasa*' is part of Ayurvedic lore. Many such simple practices set in the everyday mundane routines of living are recommended *dhaarana* (contemplative) practices that my teacher Yogacharya Krishnamacharya would mention casually. I am sure the serious researchers are not part of this 'cultural appropriation'. But like most of Yoga has been plucked out of its context and innovated out of recognition in the name of making it accessible (more commercially viable?), we run the risk of a practice that has profound possibilities becoming a pill for an ill.

DhyAna taken seriously will definitely lead to the discovery of the higher purpose of ones life. This is purpose cannot be the answer to questions like "how do I make more profits?" nor "how do I get the next promotion?" The Paris events of 2015, namely, Charlie Hebdo, the recent terrorist killings and the Climate Talks point to an urgent, perhaps long overdue need to do a fundamental reorienting of the use of science and technology in the service of world peace, sustainability and equity. *Dhyaana* and *anapAnasati* are set in a philosophy that places great emphasis on compassion. I am not sure 'mindfulness' cares about this philosophy; it is most commonly presented in a context of personal success.