# Allopathic Mindfulness Vs Yogic dhyāna

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Yogacharya Krishnamacharya

Leadership and management development seems to be taking a liking for ‘Mindfulness’. A lot of research is getting published, and most of it focuses on CEOs and how they benefit from 20 minutes of mindfulness practice. I am sure every organisation member 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. He was a regular meditator. I remember commenting about his attitude, “You have to handle this every day for long hours” I said. A fascinating discussion ensued on how important it is for a person to go back home after a difficult day’s work in a state of mind where he can smile at his wife and play with his children. “Yoga and *dhyāna* are indispensable for me” was his final statement. He practised *prāṇāyāma* 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 do not doubt that all the research done by Jon Kabat-Zinn and other leading researchers on the Buddhist meditators from Dalai Lama’s senior monks is excellent work. However, a few tendencies worry me.

**Mindfulness- the 'active ingredient'**

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

***Dhyāna* is embedded in Yogic discipline**

Let me illustrate: *dhyāna* is one of the 'eight limbs' of Yogic discipline. All Indian Spiritual teachings accept these eight limbs or suggest variations of the discipline. For example, the worldview that characterizes both Yogic and Buddhist thought, makes 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 practised a form of meditation that was meaningful to them. *Dhyāna* is not a 'detachable fragment'! The practice of *ahiṃsā* is an essential prerequisite and *dhārmik* living is the goal. It has been recognized 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 an integral part of a holistic treatment. One wonders what the side effects would be of practising 'mindfulness the pill'.

***Dhyāna* is essential for sustainable living**

Secondly, the contemplative practices have grown out of the worldview that a human being is "part of Nature". What happens when this idea is plucked out of its nutrient medium and placed, often sold, as a tool for effectiveness? IMHO, *dhyāna* 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 probably enhance the effectiveness of executives who do not wish to ask difficult questions regarding their motivations, the impact of their business on the environment, on equity and the like. This is because these practices that make one's mind sharper and more retentive are placed in a context that values 'utilitarianism' as its defining characteristic.

**Cultural Appropriation**

Thirdly, ‘Mindfulness’ is presented as if it is a Western 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. The psychological correlates of mindful eating and savouring the ‘six *rasa*’ is part of Ayurvedic lore. Many such simple practices set in the everyday mundane routines of living are recommended *dhāraṇā* (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 process of making it accessible (more commercially viable?), we run the risk of a practice that has profound possibilities becoming a “pill for an ill”.

### ***Dhyāna*** **and higher purpose**

*Dhyāna* practices seriously and in the traditional way will lead to the discovery of the higher purpose of one’s life. This “higher purpose” cannot be the answer to questions like “How do I make more profits?” nor “How do I get the next promotion?” The common discourse is now peppered with references to the “Poly crisis” as the World Economic Forum calls the Anthropocene. This points to an urgent, perhaps long-overdue need to fundamentally reorient the use of science and technology in the service of world peace, sustainability and equity. *Dhyāna*’ and ‘*ānapānasati*’ 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 the context of personal success.