

Exploring the “Mindful Way through Depression”: A Christian Explanation for how and why Eastern insights can help relieve chronic unhappiness

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I. Introduction:

I have had... beatings to the point of unconsciousness—ripped, broken, arms taken out of the socket and that compares nothing... doesn't even begin to be the pain that became every day, just right here (pointing to chest) – this thing that wouldn't come off – that made it hard to breathe.. Like, I would rather have every day, just hours and hours of people beating the crap out of me than to [have] been where I was just inside. It hurt that bad....there were times I thought it would kill me – all on its own, that I wouldn't have to do anything (Mother facing depression)

- “Fixed Brain” – Neuroplasticity: Learning a language (Osterhout et al., 2008); Cognitive therapy (Goldapple, et al., 2004); meditation practice (Lutz, et al., 2008): Nature bestows upon [humans] a considerably complex brain, but one that is best seen as prewired – flexible and subject to change – rather than hardwired, fixed and immutable... The structure of the brain is exquisitely sensitive to experience. Nature has been very clever indeed, endowing us with machinery not only so fantastic that it can organize itself but also so supple that it can refine and retune itself every day of our lives. The brain is capable of ...impressive feats of experience – driven reorganization (Marcus, 2004, pp., 12, 45, 148).
- “Genes – as – blueprint” – Epigenetics: The “fluid genome” (Nobel Prize winner Barbara McClintock) - e.g., healthy diet, exercise and meditation changes expression of 500 genes: turning 48 preventive genes “on” and 453 cancer- promoting genes “off” (Ornish, 2008).
- Beginner’s mind: John Kabat- Zinn (“JKZ”: mindfulness for beginners CD)/Hasn’t psychology figured out this stuff already?

II. Eastern Insights: Williams, Teasdale, Segal & Kabat – Zinn (2007). A mindful way through depression: Freeing yourself from chronic unhappiness. New York: Guilford Press [MWD” below]

A. The starting point: Rethinking “Thought” And “Emotion”

Isn't it true that we've gotten so good at thinking that we don't experience thoughts as thought anymore? Isn't it true that we tend to experience our ideas, opinions and thoughts as facts, as the absolute reality of things? (JKZ)

1. **How does this apply to depression?** “Mindweather” and “Thought spam.”

Illustration: Once I felt depressed, I took it for granted that I WAS depressed: That was my foregone conclusion. (A.B. Curtiss Story)

2. **Neuroscientific explanation for depression passing:** “Jamming/short-circuiting” pathway between lower/higher lobes

B. Easier said than done: Exploring barriers to a new way.

1. **Knee-Jerk reaction: Do something to make it stop..!!**

When depression starts to pull us down, we often react, for very understandable reasons, by trying to get rid of our feelings by suppressing them or by trying to think our way out of them... In our heads, we try out this solution and that solution... We get lost in comparisons of where we are versus where we want to be, soon living almost entirely in our heads. (MWD, p. 5)

2. Problems with this just-need-to-try-ahrd order approach?

- What if, like virtually everybody else who suffers repeatedly from depression, you have become a victim of your own very sensible, even heroic, efforts to free yourself- like someone pulled even deeper into quicksand by the struggling intended to get you out? (MWD)
- Nothing we *do* when we start to go down seems to help because trying to get rid of depression in the usual problem – solving way, trying to “fix what’s “wrong” with us, just digs deeper. The 3:00 A.M. obsessing over the state of our lives... the self-criticism for our “weakness” when we feel ourselves slipping into sadness...the desperate attempts to talk our hearts and bodies out of feeling the way they do – all are mental gyrations that lead nowhere but further down. Anyone who has tossed and turned night after sleepless night or been distracted from everything else in life by endless brooding knows well how fruitless these efforts are. Yet we also know how easy it is to get trapped in these habits of mind. (MWD)

3. Story & Further explanation: Controlling the mind.

- Research has shown that when we try to suppress thoughts... what we resist persists: our attempts to force the mind can rebound in exactly the opposite direction from the one we want... If this is true for neutral thoughts and images... It’s not difficult to imagine what happens when we try to suppress negative thoughts, images and memories of a very personal nature.
- If we’ve experienced persistent low mood in the past, we are likely to put a lot of mental effort into keeping negative thinking at bay. Research... shows that this can work for a little while – but at a huge cost: Those who put more effort into keeping negatives out of mind end up being more depressed than those who do not. (MWD, P. 75).

4. So what is the alternative? It is actually ok to *solve* the problem of feeling bad. In fact, it is wise because our habitual ways of solving problems almost invariably wind up making things worse. (MWD)

**Thought Experiment: Biff at the high school reunion...

C. Redemptive steps forward: Cultivating a new way of being.

1. Recognizing deeper patterns of mindlessness/ Monkey-mind: Our minds tend to be all over the place, leaping chaotically from topic to topic like monkeys leaping from tree to tree through the jungle. (MWD, p. 73).

2. Seeing the subtle consequences: Carried away by the thought stream.

- When we lose ourselves in thought...it can sweep our mind and carry it away, and in a very short time, we can be carried far indeed. We hop a train of association, not knowing that we have hopped on, and certainly not knowing the destination. Somewhere down the line, we may wake up and realize that we have been thinking that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train, it may be in a very different mental environment from where we jumped aboard (Glstein, p. 169 MWD)
- When not examined in larger field of awareness, thinking can run amok. It can also wind up, along with our emotions, imprisoning us, causing great suffering (JKZ)
- Unawareness pervades our lives...The patterns of the mind that get us stuck in unhappiness and depression are old, overlearned habits that get pulled up from memory and take control when we're not fully awake and present. We've passed the reins over to the automatic pilot in the mind... (MWD, p. 61 "Turning off the autopilot").

D. So What Can I Do?

1. Practicing "nothing": Stopping.

What's the purpose of all this living if it's just to get some place else?... Wait a minute, this is your life? We only have moments. (JKZ)

2. What's the big deal about stopping? The present moment.

- It is unbearably painful to realize how unaware she had been of the meaning and wonder of life... Emily laments, "Do...human beings ever realize life while they live it –every, every minute?" Thomas S. Monson, Ensign, Nov 2008, 84- 87
- There is an unsuspected power in inhabiting the moment you're living in right now with full awareness (MWD)

3. Mindfulness: A definition.

- My working definition of mindfulness is that it's paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, as if your life depended on it, non-judgmentally (JKZ)
- Simpler version: "Conscious affectionate awareness of the moment."
- Awareness is something we're all intimately familiar with and yet complete strangers to... Training in mindfulness is really just the cultivation of a resource that is already yours. It doesn't require going anywhere, getting anything... but it does require in some way learning to inhabit another domain of mind that we are, as a rule, fairly out of touch with. (JKZ)

4. How again is this relevant for depression?

- As far as thoughts themselves are concerned, through mindfulness we can cultivate a new and very different relationship to them, allowing thoughts simply to be here instead of analyzing them, trying to work out where they came from, or trying to get rid of them in any way...in this way, it becomes much clearer which thoughts are helpful and which are merely the endless "propaganda" of depression (MWD, p. 164-165)

- Moment by moment we have opportunities to step out of that story line of thinking and getting hijacked by our emotions and our ideas and opinions, our likes and dislikes and be with the actuality; to rest in the awareness that is our partner, our ally, our birthright. (JKZ)
- Each time we gently label our thoughts as “thinking” and intentionally disengage from the thought stream, we reinforce the shift in relationship toward seeing thoughts as thoughts. They are mental events that pass through the mind like clouds or weather patterns pass through the sky... this should help us drop into a wider and wiser perspective on these thought patterns... helping us see them with some degree of nonattachment, as frequent visitors to the mind [or “well-known features of the landscape of depression”] rather than identifying with them as parts of ourselves or hearing them as the voice of truth or reality (MWD, p. 171)
- Practicing in this way allows us to bring this relationship to thoughts into more and more of our moments, freeing ourselves from their grip and allowing our inherent wisdom to discern their wider movements and patterns within the mind. With time, we may come to experience an open, spacious quality in our awareness that easily holds whatever is arising in the domain of mind or body... and learn to rest in that awareness itself.
- This isn’t some Spartan, steel-trap, discerning, cold exercise or some weird “naval-gazing, zombie-voodoo stuff. Rather it is an experiment in cultivating greater levels of patience, compassion for yourself, open-mindedness and gentle persistence. These qualities can aid in freeing us from the “gravitational pull of” of depression (JKZ)
- If we find ourselves taken hostage and carried away by the thought stream, it makes sense to steady and gather the mind by focusing on the breath and remembering that every in-breath is a new beginning and every out-breath a release, a letting go. (MWD p. 169)
- Mindful awareness and learning to be with unpleasant feelings are not about striving for some ideal of happiness in the face of the difficult... rather, it is as if we are bathing the difficult situation, and even our aversion to it, in an open, compassionate, and accepting awareness, just like a mother embracing a suffering child. [In this way] we immediately short-circuit... and disrupt the automatic links among body sensations, feelings, and thoughts that perpetuate vicious cycles and downward mood spirals... Rather than seeing uncomfortable experiences as “bad and threatening things,” a view that triggers avoidance and gets us stuck in suffering, we begin to see them for what they are: passing mental events—bundles of bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts. (MWD, 150)
- Bringing unpleasant feelings into awareness weakens their influence over our mind and enables us to respond to them in ways that do not evoke or perpetuate aversion and make spiraling into depression more likely...[In this way, we can ultimately] transform a cascade of reactions into a series of choice points. (MWD, p. 121)

5. Question #1: is this about stopping our thinking?

Meditation is not about shutting off our thinking, not about shutting down our thinking; it's not saying 'it would be better if you didn't think' and that we're trying to just suppress all thought and have the mind be silent. If you try to suppress your thoughts, you're going to wind up with a gigantic headache. It's like trying to stop the ocean from waving; it's in the nature of the surface of the mind to wave, secrete these little thoughts; these bubbles coming off a pot of water... but if we get caught in them; if we self-identify with them— "that's me; that's not me" – then we're really caught. That's what's called clinging. (JKZ)

6. Question #2: So would I need to start a separate meditation practice? Would this add to my work-load?

- Non- striving: we should re-title the human species "human doings" ...realising that you are already here. There's no place to go because the agenda is to be awake. Then people say, 'well, then I'll never get anything done'... The fact is, meditation is not about navel gazing...it's about letting the doing come out of being. And then that's some other doing. And then that's some other being (JKZ)
- It is important to acknowledge the difficulty of this practice; we are so used to living inside our thoughts rather than attending to them that it can be extraordinarily challenging to maintain a mindful relationship to thinking for any length of time. (MWD, p. 165)
- We must be careful when working with thoughts in this way. There is a fine line between taking a friendly interest in our thoughts as mental events and becoming seduced by their content and emotional charge. We can virtually be bushwacked and bamboozled by them, drawn imperceptibly into believing that they are true and they are us and we are them... we "become" them. (MWD, p. 169)

III. Conclusion: Trusting that a way to freedom exists.

- When we stop trying to attain pleasant feelings, such feelings are more likely to emerge by themselves. When we stop trying to force pleasant feelings, they are freer to emerge on their own. When we stop trying to resist unpleasant feelings, we may find that they can drift away by themselves (MWD)
- We *already* have the capacity to experience peace and happiness deep within ourselves. We do not have to earn enough points to deserve it or hunt for it someplace else. We simply have to learn how to skillfully get out of our own way. Getting out of our own way allows the deeper reservoirs of peace and happiness within us to reveal themselves so we may gain far more ready access to them. (MWD)

"I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children... and all flesh shall know that I, the Lord, am thy Savior and thy redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob" (Isaiah 49)

Citations

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