

As a Psychotherapist Treating Eco-Anxiety and Eco-Grief, Mindfulness Helps. Sometimes.

As mindfulness grows in popularity, an incomplete understanding can prevent us from getting what we need most.



Photo by Isabel Hoyos

Like most people I know, there are days when I feel like I have more commitments than I can manage. I'm a practicing psychotherapist in two states, founder of an integrative medicine program, author of three books, a university professor, and a very involved grandmother. At the end of a typically overbooked day, I relish the quiet, candle-lit yoga studio, and I drop onto my mat into a *shavasana* (corpse pose) before the class begins. I rely on

yoga and other centering practices almost as much as I do sleep, intimate friendships, and weekend getaways.

I specialize in climate psychology, and my waiting list grows as more and more people seek treatment for eco-anxiety, eco-grief, and the entire range of emotional distress resulting from awareness of our escalating climate crisis. Mindfulness meditation is an essential part of my self-care, and I teach mindfulness in my work. I literally can't imagine my life without the practices that support me in being present with my eyes, mind, and heart open to the full gamut of life — the suffering and joy, the effort and repose, the solitude and engagement. And there's now a wide array of teachings and styles of meditative practice available to many more people than ever in the past.

Recently, though, I've felt unsettled by some of the perspectives on mindfulness I've heard in my contemplative communities. They reveal what I see as a shadow side of mindfulness practice that reflects an incomplete understanding of what "present-moment awareness" really means. When it comes to climate change and other critical social issues, an incomplete practice can do more harm than good.

For beginners, mindfulness practice often involves using a body-scan technique that draws our attention toward physical sensations and away from mental chatter. We're guided to take note of the feeling of our clothing's texture on the skin, the sensation of pressure where our body meets the surfaces we're resting on, the heat, coolness, and moisture of the air, ambient sounds — all the ways our senses register their immediate and direct experience. For many, this practice develops into a felt sense of quiet aliveness and even relief at being temporarily free of the demands of daily life and a distracted mind. Holding a firm focus on sensations is a wonderful first step toward a deeper experience

of mindfulness practice — and yet when these practices are taught, the more profound context is often missing, and the meditator stops at this stage.

It's great to learn how to cultivate a calm, present-moment awareness, but as an isolated experience that's like hearing a single musical note while blocking awareness of the tones that precede and follow. We miss the song itself with its rhythmic patterns and melody. This slice of practice can be mistakenly interpreted as the whole, as though all of reality were only what one is directly experiencing right here and now in the body. Even if a fiery meteor was plummeting toward the meditation hall, in this narrow form of awareness, it's not real until it becomes a direct sensory experience. And perhaps this is an apt metaphor for the kind of attention we pay — or don't pay — to the escalating climate crisis.

One of the best-known teachers of mindfulness is Thich Nhat Hanh, or Thay as he's called by his millions of followers around the world. In his book *Understanding Our Mind*, he explains, "When we are in contact with the present moment, we are in contact with all of time, including the past and the future." In a 2003 interview, he clarifies: "Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on — not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you." Present-moment awareness is both an immediate *andan* expansive experience, and mindfulness practice invites us to extend this far-reaching presence to all our life experiences.

Mindfulness is the ultimate "practical practice." Thay uses the term *engaged Buddhism* to describe an ideal integration of our present-moment awareness with social activism. This is his history as well as his teaching. He was a young monk in the 1960s in his native Vietnam and witnessing the tremendous anguish of war

devastating his fellow citizens inspired him to activism. He states, “Buddhism has to do with your daily life, with your suffering and with the suffering of the people around you... When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time.” He called monks and nuns out of their monasteries and into the streets to join the tens of thousands of community organizers they’d previously trained to lead protests in his war-torn country.

This is the opposite of floating in a present-moment bubble, and it goes beyond being an empathetic witness. It’s meditation in action. I experience it as a marriage of compassion and grit. Because of his lifelong activism, Thay is called an “unsung hero in the world’s climate fight” due to his ongoing efforts to raise awareness of environmental issues.

The term “spiritual bypass” was coined by psychologist Dr. John Welwood in the 1980s to describe this precise pitfall that waylays seekers in all traditions. He warned that spiritual practices can be used to circumvent difficult emotional experiences as “...we try to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it.” When it comes to climate chaos, one of the biggest drivers of denial is our unconscious resistance to facing the profound grief that accompanies the catastrophic loss of life and property to increasing wildfires, hurricanes, and floods, the tragic loss of thousands of species as the sixth extinction advances every day, and our anguish and anxiety when we anticipate the growing devastation predicted by climate science. We bypass our emotional pain using psychological defenses when it seems too overwhelming to bear.

But the times are calling out for us to respond mindfully to the global crisis our civilization has created. Climate change is the most monumental emergency humanity has ever faced, and it demands clear objectives, empowering actions, and skillful ways to

initiate systemic transformation: inner and outer changes that we've yet to fully imagine and enact. To be effective, we need to build the internal strength to remain present with open hearts and minds and increase our capacity to bear witness to pain in ourselves and others. As we practice mindfulness, we gradually learn how to "just be present with" with our own thoughts and feelings as we gently surround them with awareness, kind curiosity, and calm breathing — and this present-moment awareness organically leads to empathy and right action. Mindfulness, correctly placed at the center of this journey, can be an enormous asset.

It's a tremendous psychological grind for those on the front lines of climate work, and burnout is rampant. Lawyer and activist Brandon Abdinor recently wrote, "The fibers of my being have finished screaming. They are exhausted. I'm trying to write another article on climate change and the law, and how things could be fixed. But I'm really battling to find the 'We can do this!' in me right now." Bearing witness to massive environmental degradation is a form of traumatic stress, and our emotions can run the gauntlet from rage to despair at the lack of responsiveness as the destruction continues. I've been surprised to find that even many of my peers who are well trained in psychological resiliency struggle with the pain of global warming conversations and are eager to change the subject. As much as I want to pull my friends from their yoga mats to join me in advocacy work, I also want to help my activist colleagues to discover the mindfulness-based resiliency tools that will support their bodies, minds, and emotions as they carry out their soul-searing work

Equipping ourselves to turn the tide and build a sustainable future will require a tough psychological reckoning. The immeasurable damage to the planet caused by our collective actions is forcing us to look squarely at the lifestyle patterns we've learned from our pervasive corporate, political, and social culture. Why do we

continue to live the way we do, given the overwhelming evidence of the consequences? The task before us demands that we take a deep, honest look at our individual and shared beliefs about our relationship to life itself. A deeply mindful examination of ourselves and our humanity will naturally lead to an evolving psychological maturity, transformative action, and a new way of living aligned with the laws of nature. The practice of mindful awareness can support the emergence of our new human story.

I participate in climate justice marches, sign petitions for change, and help create clean energy policies, but I tend to view advocacy work in broad terms. Meaningful change must come in all areas of our current system, and we need everyone — parents, city planners, farmers, scientists, students, economists, artists, engineers — to bring their sustainability perspectives and activities to their sphere of influence. Advocacy can and should take many forms.

I'm exploring how I can most effectively contribute to climate solutions from within my field by addressing the emotional roots of denial and apathy; understanding the behavioral sciences' perspectives on how people make change; utilizing effective communication strategies in contentious situations; building emotional buoyancy when individuals and communities are faced with trauma, loss, and anxiety; promoting civic engagement as a therapeutic antidote to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and isolation; sharing nuanced, emotionally intelligent strategies that help nonprofits inspire social action among their audiences; and creating trainings for mental health professionals in climate psychology. Every discipline is ripe with opportunities to make valuable contributions to fostering environmental sustainability.

I love and value both my contemplative and my activist colleagues, and I recognize the essential gifts they can offer each other. While

there are seasoned practitioners and socially engaged communities that integrate both dimensions, there often remains a wide chasm between them. This may be a modern iteration of the “doing vs being” paradox — but when we look mindfully, embrace our humanity, and move beyond the fragmented polarities of both burnout activism and bubble-living, we find that there’s no separation. Perhaps we can advance this work by preparing for the next march with a period of stillness, and swing by the yoga studio to pick up a few more protesters on the way.



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