

Article

Waking up from Delusion: Mindfulness (*Sati*) and Right Mind-and-Heart (*Bodhicitta*) for Educating Activists

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Abstract: In the face of current turbulent times including climate emergencies, species extinction, the erosion of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism—in short, a suffering world—the authors of this paper propose that education needs to be centrally an activist effort dedicated to healing and repairing the increasingly wounded and damaged world. To this end, this paper explores Buddhism as an educational program that centralizes a healing curriculum based on the understanding that healing comes from waking up from the delusion of possessive individualism (ego-selves) that gives rise to neoliberal capitalist societies. This delusion is the existential home of suffering. Waking up requires the disciplined effort of seeing through and past individualism to the workings of mutual causality within a universe of interconnection (Interbeing), such as ours. The mindfulness (*sati*) practice that the historical Buddha taught is such a form of mental discipline. Through the agentic cultivation of *sati* and subsequent remembrance of our inherent Interbeing, we can rediscover and rekindle the inherently enlightened mind of *bodhicitta*. This paper explores various psychological, sociocultural, ideological, and relational conditionings that act as barriers to seriously practicing mindfulness, including the currently popular conceptions of mindfulness in North America. While acknowledging that successful practice takes setting up the right conditions, our paper also delves into helpful and supportive conditions for mindfulness practice for activists, namely, ethical motivation and contemplative/healing emotions such as the Four Immeasurables.

Keywords: mindfulness (*sati*); Four Noble Truths; *bodhicitta*; interbeing; Four Immeasurables; healing education and curriculum; contemplative activism



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1. Buddhism as an Educational Program towards Healing

The historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gotama, was essentially an educator and a healer. Soon after his enlightenment experience, he decided to teach, and he taught continuously for 45 years. His teaching had a major objective: to help people become released from suffering. That is compassion in action. The Buddha offered a healing curriculum towards this based on his deep and penetrating understanding of how the human mind-body-psyche-heart work. By all accounts, the historical Buddha was a great teacher: a skilled pedagogue (or rather, an andragogue, since he mainly taught adults). Our paper focuses on the teachings of the historical Buddha as an educator and healer.

In choosing to explore and discuss the educational and healing dimensions of Buddhism for this paper, we, the authors, are not implicitly dismissing Buddhism as a religion or being critical of the religious aspects of the historical Buddha's mission and legacy. Buddhism is a religion and, like all world religions, has a very complex history of migration and cultural adaptation across the globe during a span of over two thousand years. Notwithstanding this, the educational and healing dimensions of Buddhism can serve as a resource in other aspects of our being in this world. As such, we again underline the scope and purpose of our paper as educational (towards becoming human, becoming wholesome and ethical persons) and therapeutic (for healing), with a particular focus on the

philosophical and psychological teachings of the Buddha that can inspire, guide, support, and resource us in our social and ecological activist work.

Facing and living through current turbulent times including climate emergencies, species extinction, the erosion of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism in many parts of the world—in short, facing and living within a suffering world—we, the authors, believe that education needs to be centrally an activist effort. We need to educate people to take up healing and repairing the increasingly wounded and damaged world that is undergoing one crisis after another.

1.1. *The Buddha the Healer and Educator*

The very first lecture that the Buddha delivered after he attained enlightenment is known as the Four Noble Truths. In a more contemporary rendering of The Four Noble Truths, we would say that what is presented is a four-part educational program (e.g., [Thurman 2008](#)) that delves into: (1) an existential postulation—it is normal for humans to experience suffering; (2) an epistemic proposition—suffering has causes that we can discern; (3) a practical empowerment—we can determine and work through the root cause of suffering; and (4) an educational offering—there is a certain path that can lead to the end of suffering.

The Pali word that has been translated into English as “suffering” is *dukkha* (*dukkha* in Pali; *duhkha* in Sanskrit). Etymologically, “*du*” means “bad, difficult”, and “*kha*” means “empty”. Historically speaking, what is referenced here is badly made wooden wheels, such as carts and carriages built in the days of the Buddha, whose center hole to which spokes are attached is not well crafted and, therefore, makes the ride in the vehicle rough and distressing. This is to say that *dukkha* points to feelings and perceptions in our everyday life experience that are uneasy, dissatisfying, uncomfortable, unpleasant, disappointing, upsetting, and painful. *Dukkha* spans mild yet chronic stress to severe trauma: in short, it dynamically ranges over the whole spectrum of human dis-ease and misery. Translated into present-day colloquial language, *dukkha* could well be understood as a stressful experience, or simply, stress. We do not need to work hard to imagine what it is like to live a stressful life. In the midst of the current global COVID-19 pandemic, the rise in authoritarianism and violence in many countries, and the climate emergencies that we are facing, we can perhaps relate only too well to life as *dukkha*.

How often do most of us experience *dukkha*? The authors’ guess is that most people in North America experience *dukkha* every day, notwithstanding that Canada and the United States, in which the authors of this paper live, are two of the richest countries in the world. Some may experience *dukkha* to mild and manageable degrees with various coping mechanisms and skills; others, much more severely to the point of contemplating suicide (psychological implosion) or hurting others (psychological explosion); and the rest would fall into various points between these poles on the spectrum. The Buddha thus “normalizes”—to use a contemporary term—human discontent and distress: everyone experiences it on a regular basis. All the same, suffering is usually debilitating in some way, and tends to limit our capacity to grow and flourish. Suffering reduces us. However, working with and through suffering empowers us and engenders growth in us. This is how we move towards healing. To use contemporary psychotherapeutic language regarding healing, human resilience and growth come from examining the ruptures and wounds and repairing them through the psychological integration of painful memories. Such integration is best facilitated within supportive relational environments ([Badenoch 2018](#)).

The first step in the direction of healing is to recognize that we are hurt and focus our attention and energy on healing. That is The First Noble Truth’s message. Yet, strangely enough, this very first step is a challenging one to take. Being raised and conditioned in a survivalistic culture such as ours, any admission that we are hurt and damaged is tantamount to admitting that we failed, that we are “losers”, and that something is wrong with us. Vulnerability is not a social virtue ([Brown 2021b](#)). But healing begins only when we recognize and acknowledge, to ourselves and to each other, that we are hurt, and

that we need help and support. Therefore, the Buddha's educational program (Thurman 1999) starts with an encouragement that we acknowledge our suffering and that, moreover, suffering is normal for human beings: we all get hurt, every day, many times a day, and sometimes in very big ways. Normal, however, does not mean necessary or inevitable.

Not wanting to admit that we are deeply hurt, because such an admission would make us look weak and failing, we tend to blame the world for disappointing us, frustrating us, making us ill and miserable, damaging and painning us, and so on. Indeed, we most often have reasons to hold the world (others) responsible for our pain. If a stone hits one in the head while walking down the sidewalk, then the pain and ensuing complications and suffering one experiences are inflicted by forces or agents outside the victim. Surely the Buddha would not hold the victim responsible for the pain and suffering they are experiencing. Surely the Buddha would not blame the victim. However, the whole thrust of The Four Noble Truths is that the suffering person takes the "ownership" of one's suffering and does the work of overcoming suffering (Frankl 2006). Does this not sound like blaming the victim and/or making the victim do the work of repairing and recovering from damage incurred or inflicted by others? Is this fair; is it just? We address these questions in the next section.

1.2. Leveraging Human Agency

The Buddha was a pragmatist (Kalupahana 1987). His compassionate concern was the alleviation of *dukkha*. One pervasive form of *dukkha* is outlined in the parable of The Second Arrow,¹ which is a Buddhist story that illustrates how we can become stuck in suffering and perpetuate it. If we direct our attention and energy away from the pain that we are experiencing and what needs to be done to alleviate it, towards regrets, blame, revenge, or punishments, even if conceived in the name of justice, the pain and suffering remains. All manner of moralistic *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts* can preoccupy us and distract us from the work of resolving our suffering, thereby draining our energy and time. To note, one can direct the blame and the urge to punish just as easily towards the self as towards others.

That is why the first step to healing is the acknowledgement of and "owning" one's suffering: "I am suffering; suffering is happening *right here and now*. Suffering is in me". To understand this point of view, we need to be critical in discerning whether our social and moral analysis of suffering and ensuing activism, however valid and valedictory, is not in fact in avoidance of facing the truth about ourselves and our reality. As a cultural collective, we have distracted ourselves endlessly from truly facing and grappling with The First Noble Truth by all manner of escapism, such as consumerism, industrialism, moralism, legalism, and even militarism. Perhaps our participation in activism can take the form of not truly facing and grappling with The First Noble Truth when we are hooked by the idea of being right (Chödrön 2007). This would be especially the case when, as now, the magnitude of human suffering is enormous and its etiology very complex. More than ever, we need encouragement and empowerment. The subtext of The Four Noble Truths is such encouragement and empowerment: suffering is not inevitable or inescapable. We *can* overcome suffering.

Suppose that we do heed the Buddha's First Noble Truth and acknowledge the vulnerable, perhaps even sometimes terrifying, truth about ourselves: that we are beings socially and psychologically conditioned to suffer. Existentially speaking, individual human beings, born into human society, are thrown into the matrix of suffering by the historical and societal forces that have been operative throughout civilization. From this perspective, it is difficult not to see ourselves as victims. What, then? The Second Noble Truth addresses us as knowing subjects and moral agents, not victims, who *can* deconstruct our conditioning: this is empowerment. We are not placed in some random and meaningless universe in which things just happen to us, wherein we are helpless and hapless victims. In fact, seeing ourselves that way decisively disempowers and disables us.

Nor are we alone, and our experience of suffering unaccounted for, with no knowledge, support, or resources. Our suffering arises out of pre-existing conditions, however complex

and innumerable, and we can work through these conditions sufficiently to create new conditions that will resolve existential crises and facilitate healing, with support, guidance, and help from many sources. The key to the Second Noble Truth is that, after the realization that humans are afflicted with suffering—which goes for all of us—we can study, observe, and understand the mutually causative factors and conditions (Macy 1991) behind our suffering, at least enough to do something about the situation and move away from the hooks and grips of suffering. The Third and the Fourth Noble Truths point to the practical dimension of our work as knowing subjects: drawing upon the wisdom and knowledge of those who worked through suffering, collectively and individually, we know how to do this healing work, and we have solid guidance and mentorship possibilities in place for our work.

Thus, we may understand the vision of The Four Noble Truths as an invitation to us to become agents of change and transformation for creating a more ethical and ecological life. More concretely, what is suggested is the role that a limiting notion within human psychology, namely, that we are ego-selves, plays in the production of suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth is the Buddha's proposal for a concrete educational program: the Noble Eightfold Path that we can embark on and follow, instead of another program premised upon the delusional idea of the ego-self that most of us have followed as a result of dominant mainstream culture, including capitalism, neoliberalism, industrialism, corporatism, consumerism, and so on. They all point to one root idea—a source of delusion: that we are ego-selves.

All in all, the Four Noble Truths are premised on the idea that we can be the agent of change for healing. The work of change for healing is primarily self-work or inner work: the work one performs upon one's self. Again, this emphatically does not mean that the work falls on individual selves who are all fundamentally alone and have to labor alone. Such would be completely the opposite to the Buddha's conception of human beings as No-ego-self (*anatta*), meaning that humans are not individualist social-atoms: we are not ego-selves. We explore in the next section the meaning of No-ego-self—a key concept, along with two other key concepts, that are known as the Three Dharma Seals.²

It is said that the last instruction that the Buddha gave to his disciples before he passed away was to make oneself a light, emphasizing the self-work and inner work involved in overcoming suffering. Here is Mary Oliver's (2017) moving and inspiring rendering of *The Buddha's Last Instruction*:

“Make of yourself a light,”
 said the Buddha,
 before he died.
 I think of this every morning
 as the east begins
 to tear off its many clouds
 of darkness, to send up the first
 signal—a white fan
 streaked with pink and violet,
 even green.
 An old man, he lay down
 between two sala trees,
 and he might have said anything,
 knowing it was his final hour.
 The light burns upward,
 it thickens and settles over the fields.
 Around him, the villagers gathered
 and stretched forward to listen.
 Even before the sun itself
 hangs, disattached, in the blue air,
 I am touched everywhere

by its ocean of yellow waves.
 No doubt he thought of everything
 that had happened in his difficult life.
 And then I feel the sun itself
 as it blazes over the hills,
 like a million flowers on fire—
 clearly I'm not needed,
 yet I feel myself turning
 into something of inexplicable value.
 Slowly, beneath the branches,
 he raised his head.
 He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd. (Oliver 2017, p. 314)

2. Forgetting of Human Nature as Interbeing

Make of yourself a light. This instruction has all the simplicity of a direct expression. And the Buddha did provide a comprehensive methodology: The Noble Eightfold Path. However, when looking around the world, signs and evidence of making oneself a light seem scarce, if not non-existent. From this disappointing news, it may be tempting to conclude that the whole possibility of enlightenment is closer to fantasy than reality. The skeptic—the critical intellect—in us would demand: “Show us this possibility! Rationally convince and persuade us.” This is where we can turn to the key understanding established in the Buddhist philosophy that is akin to the empirical truth of gravity or the ecological truth of interconnection: what Hanh (1987) calls *interbeing*.

If something is an empirical truth, it operates with or without our knowing. We may forget, or even perhaps never knew, that gravity operates all the time on this planet, but the moment we defy it, we risk injury or life. The Buddhist worldview also posits an empirical truth, a feature of humanity, called *bodhicitta*: the “enlightened mind”. *Bodhicitta* is understood to be inherent in human consciousness. It is not something that we acquire, or even create. Rather, it is built-in or, in the parlance of today, “hard-wired”. However, this does not mean that *bodhicitta* is fully developed or fully manifest within us. It, like a seed, needs to be nurtured, nourished, and developed to manifest in any fulsome and particular way. In the absence of recognition and care, it can be underdeveloped, obscured, or distorted, and, if badly suppressed, it may appear to be altogether absent.

In short, we humans are, by nature, enlightened and self-illuminating, but something can happen to us, such as—to generalize somewhat—being born into an individualist, capitalist, neoliberalist culture, and we may, in the worst case scenario, cease to light up. Not only that, we may even entirely forget that we have the enlightened Buddha nature inherent within us. This forgetting is known as ignorance (*avidya* in Sanskrit or *avijja* in Pali)³, and it is one of the Three Poisons⁴. The other two poisons are greed and hatred, which are corollary to the primary poison, ignorance. Ignorance is the primary causative factor that precipitates the other two poisons.

Ignorance in the present context means not knowing, not understanding, or not seeing our true nature as “interbeing”, to use Hanh’s (1987) neologism. “Interbeing” captures the understanding that human nature is not one of individualistic social and psychic atoms: in short, ego-selves. Rather, every aspect of our being is interdependent with the rest of the world, nature, cosmos, life, and so on. A human being is a part of the Whole and cannot be apart from the Whole, from coming into earthly existence to going out of earthly existence. Each of us is part of the whole drama of the cosmos and the earth in every way. Yet we forget this, and we think, perceive, emote, and behave *as if* we are individual social and psychic atoms: ego-selves. The consequence of this ignorance is delusion. Every time we experience and relate to the world *as if* we are categorically and substantively separate from it, insisting on “I”, “me”, “my”, and “mine”, thereby remaining apart from other beings and their subjectivity and intersubjectivity, we operate out of delusion. To extend the gravity analogy: if we forget or ignore gravity, and jump off a high building, we can get ourselves

killed. Delusion can kill us. Likewise, if we forget or do not recognize *Bodhicitta* inherent within us, we can cause harm to self and others. While there are degrees of delusion with more or less egregious consequences, the nature of delusion remains the same: “I am an ego-self”.

Seeing oneself as an ego-self radically limits one’s understanding of how one is related to the world and cosmos, as well as of one’s ethical commitment, responsibility, and engagement. Now, as ego-selves, it is not as though we do not relate at all to others. We can and do relate to other beings, both human and non-human, but only in the terms and manner of *extrinsic connection*. This manner is characterized by the pervasive instrumentalist attitude, perception, and conduct that we witness all around us. At the extremes of an extrinsic relationship, we see others as “objects” that we can manipulate, exploit, and destroy to suit, profit, and please the ego-self. Greed for more to profit the self (and whoever is part of the self’s circle) and Hatred or Enmity towards the self’s competitors or enemies are the other two poisons decocted by Delusion. When this way is practiced towards other beings with whom we share the planet, species extinction and destruction of the land, air, and water are logical results. When practiced towards racially targeted groups of human beings seen as “subhuman”, genocide is a logical result.

The Buddha as philosopher endeavors to analyze, explain, and show how we humans tend to entertain mistaken notions and wrong understandings about who we really are and how the world works, which puts us in conflict with the reality of, or as, interbeing. Pain and suffering invariably ensue when we are in conflict with reality. Understanding reality correctly as interbeing, thereby dispelling ignorance, is then the ultimate therapy: a radical modality for healing, for the existential treatment of suffering. The Buddha, we could say, was a rigorous realist and a vigorous pragmatist with regard to this therapy.

Interbeing Is Nirvana

Correct understanding or “truth” means that the views and beliefs we hold cohere, and are in alignment, with reality. Whether one holds “correct” views and beliefs is, in the final analysis, a matter of the experiencing subject’s discernment, which in turn is a function of the subject’s cultivation, over time, of clear, penetrating, and holistically capacious awareness (known to us as “mindfulness”) accompanied by love and compassion. Such cultivation is greatly facilitated by practicing together and communing with other practitioners of awareness in a community.

Furthermore, another way of discerning for truth is seeing whether we end up consistently experiencing suffering, for that would be a sign that we are not in alignment with reality. We may, then, rightly suspect that the beliefs and values we hold do not cohere with reality and thus are in need of adjustment, if not radical alteration. The Buddha provided certain heuristic guidelines whereby such adjustment or alteration can take place. These guidelines, such as Noble Eightfold Path, are based on the understanding and perception of reality as experienced by awakened, enlightened beings. Teachers of life are those who have earned the qualification to teach based on their attainment of deep wisdom and expansive virtuous qualities such as compassion, love, joy, care, and courage.

It is canonically said that the teachings of the Buddha are authenticated by the existence of what is known as the Three Dharma Seals⁵. That is, despite all manner of adaptation and hybridization as the Buddha’s dharmic teachings culturally migrate from one setting to another, we can recognize the essence of the Buddha’s philosophy and authenticate it with the Three Dharma Seals. The first seal posits that reality on the plane of phenomenal existence is impermanent (*anicca* in Pali and *anitya* in Sanskrit). This is because all phenomena are conditioned, meaning that they arise and subside, come and go, due to causes and conditions, and as such are bound to change. The second seal posits that because all phenomena are constantly changing and are thus impermanent, then, therefore, there is no independent self (*anatta* in Pali and *anatman* in Sanskrit) behind any phenomena. This understanding applies to all existential beings. However, this does not mean, as is sometimes misinterpreted, that human beings have no self. Rather, “no self” means no

independent self. As mentioned previously, human selves are *interdependent*. The third seal posits that when we come to terms with the true nature of reality, as described by the first two seals, then we can be free from existential suffering and can experience durable tranquility (*nibbana* in Pali and *nirvana* in Sanskrit).

Nirvana is not some rare, exotic, out-of-this-world kind of place where we get to go when we are enlightened or when we die—whichever comes first. In fact, when we are released from delusions about a permanent and independent reality, including the phenomenon called the ego-self, we are automatically in Nirvana, meaning a nirvanic state of consciousness and experience (Thurman 1999). There is a Zen story (Reps and Senzaki [1957] 1985) about an encounter between a samurai and Hakuin, a renowned Zen master, that illustrates this understanding. One day a samurai visits Hakuin to see what Hakuin could teach him about heaven (Nirvana) and hell (suffering). When thus asked, Hakuin right away insults the samurai about his appearance and demeans his skills and accomplishments as a samurai. The samurai is instantly enraged, rises up and draws his sword, ready to cut off Hakuin's head. Hakuin calmly announces, "There opens the Gate of Hell." The samurai instantly realizes that he was about to commit a heinous act out of anger, and he withdraws his sword. Hakuin announces: "There opens the Gate of Heaven."

Bodhicitta being our existential foundation, human beings are, then, by nature, nirvanic: we *can be* free of suffering, which means that we *can be* naturally *blissful*. This being so, however, what we need to note here yet again is that it would take some effort and work to remove the conditions, both external and internal, that obstruct and compromise the growth and development of *bodhicitta* as our foundational capacity. This work is where mindfulness comes in. Diligent work with mindfulness can help us to clear the obstructions and rediscover, nurture, and nourish *bodhicitta*. Does practicing mindfulness not sound like a clear and simple instruction?

3. Sati—Mindfulness

Clear and simple is not the same as "easy". Many of us admire the clean, clear, and utterly simple look of a beautiful Zen tea room. Suppose that we want to turn a completely cluttered, messy, and dusty room into a Zen tea room. This will take a lot of time, energy, resources, and know-how: not an easy task. The same goes for the disciplined practice that is required to transform our psyche or consciousness from an ego-driven, turbulently suffering mind to that of the *right mind* and *enlightened heart* of interbeing that is our nirvanic home, serene and tranquil in the midst of raging storms all around. The practice that increasingly takes us into the eye of storm is known to us in the English-speaking world as "*mindfulness*". The word from which this particular translation originates is *sati*, which means remembering, recollecting, or reminding (Cintita 2019).

Sati is an element within the Noble Eightfold Path, a path that forms a large part of the healing curriculum. *Sati* is a practice on this path that aims to bring our experience into focus. The practice is of turning inward; inviting pause in order to witness our inner landscape of perceptions of body, heart, mind, and psyche, or what is known in Buddhism as the Four Frames (Thera 1994). It is a practice of developing intimacy with this landscape, of beginning to realize The First Noble Truth, by asking openly and often, "What is happening now?" (Williams 2016).

By working towards *sati* becoming a regular practice, more and more of our experience comes into focus, allowing for deeper awareness of ourselves and for understanding to build. What is meant by deeper awareness and understanding? By practicing, we begin to become aware of not only *what* we are experiencing but *how* we are experiencing—the abrupt changes, subtle shifts, and returns. We begin to notice the dynamics and processes. Openness to such noticing sparks a natural curiosity to continue observing the self, others (including the more-than-human), the self with others, the self as others, etc. We start to observe the world in the way of dynamics and processes, of interbeing.

Intentionally observing more and more allows for understanding to build, and in building understanding we become rooted in a place of conscious responding to ourselves

and our contexts rather than subconsciously reacting to them. To summarize this process, *sati* is a practice that supports the development of awareness, understanding, and responding, and by doing so, is a practice that points towards empowerment. In other words, it is a practice for realizing the Four Noble Truths.

To practice *sati* we look for guidance from what is known regarding the process of practicing outlined within the Four Frames of Buddhism. To begin practicing is to train in simple awareness of the sensations within the body, using the breath as a focusing tool (Williams 2016; Thera 1994). The practitioner trains here for some time, until they feel accustomed to this practice (Thera 1994). Furthermore, it is recommended that this initial training be explored in all variations (e.g., sitting, lying down, walking, dancing) and in all contexts of living (Williams 2016; Thera 1994). *Sati* is in the everyday, from our repetitive tasks to the gamut of our relations. Once accustomed to a practice of breath and body awareness, training in the other three frames (i.e., heart, mind, and psyche) can take place, and it is common to experience a feeling of calm while exploring the practice.

Then, at some point in practicing over time, a feeling past relaxation will occur—a breakthrough state of more than calmness that feels like an ability to concentrate (Thera 1994). Perhaps this sense of concentration will be a fleeting moment at times, but it is this state that is needed in order for understanding to unfold (Thera 1994). “Unfolding understanding” means that as the practitioner is exploring *sati* within the Four Frames, they will eventually and inherently begin to engage with values or other elements within the Eightfold Path (Cintita 2019; Thera 1994). These other elements fall under the dimensions of *mental discipline*, which can be described as an ongoing and increasing desire to practice *sati* and to work with all aspects of the Four Frames without aversion (elements of right effort, mindfulness, and concentration); *ethics*, which gives consideration to how we move around in the world (elements of right speech, actions, and livelihood); and *insight*, meaning working with the accumulating understanding to respond more skillfully to what is occurring (elements of right view and resolve) (Thera 1994).

Along the way, at some point, we may begin to notice that we are not—as we have been told and conditioned to think—merely atomistic ego-selves in competition and territorial war with each other in order to survive. There are no categorical boundaries between self and other; there are no binaries of “for-or-against” and “win-or-lose”. Nor is the world some given and fixed reality, known as The Truth, but rather, reality is a constantly and dynamically interacting, transforming, under-determinate (in contrast to indeterminate) coalescence of conditions that are open to humans’ re-interpretation and alteration, while bearing witness to the ethical consequences of various human interpretations and alterations, some deadly and some life-supporting.

To summarize the above, in practicing *sati* over time and thereby walking the Eightfold Path, there comes the development of a very deep, rich, and personal wisdom. And it is the depth of such wisdom that takes us right to the foundation of human consciousness: *bodhicitta*—enlightened or awakened mind. It is important to remind ourselves again that *bodhicitta* is not something that needs to be acquired through education, training, and practice; it is the foundational mind of humanity, with which we all born. However, because of the cultural conditioning towards becoming ego-selves, most of us have to work hard to get in touch with *bodhicitta*. The Eightfold Path curriculum is designed to support such work. *Sati*, which we are focusing on here, is a supreme practice method to walk the path, whereby we go through all the layers of ego-conditioning that went into our individual survival training and get in touch with the foundation: *bodhicitta*. In this sense, *bodhicitta* is our nirvanic home. *Sati* helps us remember our home and takes us there. This understanding of *sati* presents far more than what is usually understood as “mindfulness”, offered to combat stress and anxiety.

The aforementioned understanding and process of *sati* matter to us when embarking on the journey of practicing *sati*. To see why these matter to us, it is necessary to notice how what was outlined differs from the current “normal” or mainstream practice of mindfulness. To begin to see the difference, let us start with the mainstream understanding

of mindfulness, which is often recognized as a person engaging in sitting meditation to induce calmness. This understanding points towards mindfulness as coping with stress by inviting acceptance and relaxation into the sensations of stress with the aim of reducing these sensations (Cintita 2019; Hyland 2017; Ergas 2015). Such opportunities to cope, using mindfulness meditation, are readily available (Hyland 2017; Ergas 2015). As examples, work and study places may engage in mindfulness lunch hours to support bringing calm and ease into the work- or school-week, and there are numerous recordings of the body-scan meditation and sleep casts to support subduing a busy mind to allow for sleep. Of course, inviting calm is a wonderful thing! To invite calm and have a good night's rest can be so important, not only to get through the week, but also to be able to practice *sati* within the Four Frames in the first place. And herein is the difference, within the intention or purpose of practicing mindfulness. To use the example of the body-scan meditation once more, a body-scan to support falling asleep because of "interfering" anxiety over tomorrow's deadline is very different from a body-scan in the same moment as a form of deep listening to the inner landscape. And both are needed. The concern with mainstream mindfulness is staying in the place of inviting calm, of aiming for stress reduction each time the ocean begins churning and crashing into the shore, rather than also considering, at some point, how the ocean became stirred, and what the conditions and processes were (Cintita 2019; Hyland 2017).

The concern is appropriate because mindfulness towards stress reduction is, at its best, well, stress-reducing. At its worst, it can water the seed of individualism by giving the message that *sati* is a practice of individual responsibility—that if you were not able to "achieve" a reduction in stress and feel calmer, the problem is with you as the practitioner (Bai et al. 2018). To put this another way, mainstream practice focuses on the individual working to subdue their sensations and to inattentively accept all that is around them, whether helpful and/or harmful, rather than working to cultivate an embodied personal understanding of context and mutual causality, which would then allow for conscious and wise responding. Thus, mainstream practice keeps *sati* separate from its place within the process of walking The Eightfold Path (Cintita 2019). It represents another variation on taking a piece from a holistic concept and considering it as independent and all there is. By doing so, it is also an example of a practice intended to be healing that now can have the effect of prolonging suffering and preventing healing by keeping practitioners away from, or in the darkness of, full experiencing.

4. Right Mind and Enlightened Heart for Activists

To practice *sati* skillfully, such that it can be healing, is to have some understanding of what *sati* is, as well as its purpose within and process towards walking the Eightfold Path, and to *practice*, thereby allowing for direct experience of these. It is in direct, conscious, and embodied experiencing that change is possible, and there is nothing extraordinary needed to practice except for a moment and the space to turn inward to perceive the landscape (Williams 2016). This rings true since, as much of the suffering occurs through our perceptions of the Four Frames of mind, heart, body, and psyche, then likewise much of the healing also occurs within us.

It can also be helpful to practice with others that hold a similar understanding of *sati* and its place within the Eightfold path, as all that we experience is relational. We are relational with ourselves, such as our perception of ourselves in our bodies for example, and with others, such as the people around us or the more-than-human. Life occurs within and we learn from our relationships, and as such, the presence and support of others can sometimes spark an awareness and understanding that may not have come about otherwise. This is all to say that it is within the relationship we hold with each aspect of our reality where transformation is possible, and that wisdom comes about from allowing the myriad of experiences within relationships to be present in all their complexities, sometimes in the presence of community. This understanding is at the core of the processual Buddhist philosophy and worldview in which everything that occurs is a matter of innumerable

conditions coming together in emergent ways and giving birth to each moment; each moment is pregnant with new possibilities of being. Let us now introduce human agency into this picture. After all, *sati* is agentically aimed at enlightenment and liberation.

What does enlightenment and liberation look like for us today, in the midst of ecocide, genocide, the erosion of democracy and rise of authoritarianism, and all manner of inequity and injustice everywhere? How do we practice *sati* so as to empower us and equip us to wrestle and struggle with the myriad of deep problems and issues? In short, how can *sati* support us as activists? Let us call activism supported by *sati* contemplative activism.

Human action is driven by motivation. What is achieved as a result of our action-taking can be seen as the fruit of our motivation. If motivation comes out of anger, then the result of our action, however legitimate the reasons for action-taking may be, would bear a “wrong” fruit that may undo the good reasons for action-taking. For example, if we do our justice work out of anger and hatred, we may end up perpetuating injustice or incurring greater injustice. Thus, we need to work through our anger before we act towards justice work. One of the most important ways that *sati* can help with this is in supporting purification of the mind from anger, hatred, ill-will, vengeance, greed, despair, anxiety, impatience, fear, and so on. In Buddhism, these varieties can be sorted under the list of the Three Poisons (delusion or ignorance, anger or hatred, and greed), as we briefly alluded to earlier in the paper. The practice of *sati* can, therefore, detox the mind of these poisons and return our mind-body-heart conditions towards friendliness or lovingkindness (*metta*), empathy and compassion (*karuna*), rejoicing in others’ joy and successes (*mudita*), and non-perturbation in the depth of one’s being (*upekkha*), which, as a group of affective states of consciousness, are known as the Four Immeasurables in Buddhism (Bai et al. 2016; Rasmussen 2007; Wallace 2010). Cultivation of the Four Immeasurables could supply activists with “karmically clean” ethical motivation and empowering emotional nourishment for activism.

There is a dynamic interplay between the cultivation of the Four Immeasurables and the realization of our nature as Interbeing. The deeper our realization of human nature as being grounded in Interbeing, the more naturally and effortlessly we experience the outflow of the four immeasurable states of consciousness. By the same token, the more we return to the Immeasurables, the more readily and completely we can access and manifest interbeing. In all this, *sati* foundationally supports and facilitates the realization of Interbeing and the manifestation of *bodhicitta*.

4.1. Contemplative Activism

“We have to be in touch with the monsters within, in order to have compassion with the monsters in other people . . . When we start thinking I’m monster-free . . . then we lose capacity to practice discernment, to not be vengeful, to think in terms of love.” (hooks and Salzberg 2021, 38:38–38:59)

As part of the path towards awakening, *sati*, when practiced in a holistic context as outlined above, can and should rouse the desire to be in service (*seva* in Sanskrit). *Seva* is defined as “self-less” service or ego-less service, whereby actions are taken for the good of all beings; it is the ground for being an activist who embodies the change and necessary transformation to become a healing force in our troubled world. And as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, education needs to be activist work that empowers people to engage in healing from the ways in which the world is ruptured, divisive, and damaged.

While activism takes many forms, Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) activism takes a systemic approach towards the structures, policies and processes that perpetuate oppressions such as racism, sexism, ableism and so on. There is no doubt that JEDI activism arises in response to the suffering experienced in life (The First Noble Truth). However, drawing on the quote from bell hooks above, there are two profound and connected requirements in regard to being an activist who operates from a place of *seva*: first is to become in touch with the “monster” within, and second is to not be vengeful. We address how these can be attended to within activism via contemplative approaches, such that activism might be grounded in a place of love.

It is indeed imperative to tend to these requirements within JEDI activism. First, JEDI activism focuses on creating change outwardly by changing parts of external systems, with very little recognition of the inner work, alluded to by hooks, that is also needed, perhaps even as a prerequisite for changing oppressive systems. For example, while JEDI approaches often ask people to examine bias (cultural conditioning that causes us to see differences as other and/or inferior), these examinations of bias are not often offered through compassionate frameworks of lovingly turning inward. Instead, JEDI approaches often lead to shame, blame and/or a further sense of separation from each other. This, then, leads to the second issue arising from JEDI activism, where there is a tendency to become polarized and caught in cycles of blame and shame. How do we address these issues? There are contemplative practices within the Buddhist path that can help activists first attend to their own healing (of monsters within), a very vital step that leads to recognition of our interbeing from which we can then create sustainable (non-vengeful) approaches towards changing systems.

4.2. Compassion for Monsters Within

JEDI education aims to teach activists how to critically examine the systems, structures, and policies in which oppression is maintained in order to create change. However, this education is rarely coupled with a curriculum or pedagogy that promotes healing. The focus is often on outward causes of suffering, rather than on also teaching people how to navigate their inner experiences of suffering that are here and now, in their own bodies, minds and hearts. Rather than only looking outward, we offer that it is also important to support activists in acknowledging the First Noble Truth of acknowledging suffering, and then empowering them with the Second and Third Noble Truths, that we can get to and work through the root cause of suffering; we offer that activists become *contemplative* activists. As Desmond Tutu said, “There comes a point where we need to stop pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out where they’re falling in.”

A contemplative activist would, after acknowledging suffering, venture upstream by pausing and considering the Second Noble truth, asking *what is the root?* They would come to recognize the root of suffering as a mindset where self and other are viewed as separate, not interconnected (Chödrön 2019; Eppert et al. 2015; Feuerstein 1998). Separability is grounded within the ontological claim of dualism, where the mind is separate from matter, and from there, all kinds of binaries are formed such as animate/inanimate, self/other, good/bad and so on. Moreover, there are often power hierarchies associated with the various ways in which things are split and spliced into tiered categories. A dangerous implication of maintaining a mindset based in separability is dehumanization. According to Brown (2021a), dehumanization is a process in which someone goes against their innate wiring for social connection and, in suppression of this innate need, creates enemies and justifies actions towards these enemies. Once this kind of polarization begins, there appears to be justification for harming, hurting, or killing other humans (Brown 2021a). To put it another way, when human beings become grounded in separateness, a sense of alienation arises, from which our moral agency then corrodes (Bai 2012). A contemplative activist endeavors to recognize and acknowledge separability as it arises within themselves and their activist work; they greet the monster within in order to come to know it.

Coming to know the monster within is recognizing its creation from and maintenance by ongoing separability that we inherit from our socialization, from having been taught to see ourselves as separate from fellow humans, more-than-humans, and the planet. If we do not invest in healing this ruptured, dehumanizing way of seeing and being, then how could we possibly change it? As mentioned throughout this paper, the power and agency for change lies within, and we offered the practice of *sati* as a way towards changing our seeing and being. By practicing *sati*, we have the capability for recalibrating and reprogramming ourselves so that we might be more effective agents for change; we seek out all the ways in which we built barriers to living in alignment with interconnection and collective good as

we practice. *Sati* helps us compassionately befriend the monster within, thereby clearing the way towards non-vengeful action.

4.3. Not Be Vengeful

Activist work is caring work, and caring work is a whole person investment, meaning that it also has emotional investment. One way that activism may be enhanced by practicing *sati* is in the way that *sati* supports compassionately and gently turning inward when we experience difficult emotions. If the first step in healing is recognizing that we are hurt, then the second step is to ensure that we do not fall on *The Second Arrow*, where in reaction to the pain we turn to shame, blame, revenge, or punishment, even if in the name of justice. In other words, we turn to hatred. Activists can spiral in hatred, getting stuck in further polarization, backlash and in-group fighting, especially when people are divided into binary groups (oppressed/oppressor, marginalized/privileged and so on). Such unexamined dualistic mindsets lead to further self-forgetting of the *bodhicitta* nature within each being. In some experiences this separability is also turned inward, leading to hatred of the self, or part of the self. When we get stuck in these ways, our minds and hearts then close towards the other and ourselves, and we make enemies of one another (hooks and Chödrön 2017). A more recent example is evident in the COVID-19 vaccinated/un-vaccinated camps, whereby people found themselves thinking that those who chose not to get vaccinated might deserve to get sick, and those who were vaccinated as mindless puppets, thoughts we would not hold onto when in recognition of *bodhicitta* and Interbeing (Brown 2021b).

Living within and observing the cultural context of North America, we note that activists are often struck by the second arrow, stuck in hatred because we have not been encouraged or educated to skillfully practice or work with negative emotions or internal experiences of suffering. Therefore, being aware of and working with the arising of vengefulness within, rather than simply noting and enjoying where we are without vengefulness, is critical.

Unfortunately, getting struck by the second arrow and becoming stuck happens when trying to change deeply embedded structures. By continuously working in the trenches of polarization, oppression, and pain, activists can often come to a point of losing heart, burning out and/or experiencing varying degrees of compassion fatigue (hooks 2001). How could one possibly be sustained in being able to confront these systems of harm if not trained in the Third Noble Truth, that we can reach and work through the root cause of suffering? Working through the root cause of suffering means being able to turn towards negative emotions, such as vengefulness, to digest them internally, which means going against the cultural conditioning that has taught us to turn away from or deny them. It is likewise because of such cultural conditioning that activists are encouraged to fight systems in outward ways. Therefore, it is normal that activists experience being overwhelmed and disheartened (hooks 2001). Furthermore, activism is born out of the very systems that need changing, and so there is often an urgent and troubling sense that in order to be a “good” activist one should be doing the work out there at every turn (Ikeda 2020). Chödrön (2019) aptly discusses how practicing *sati* can be useful when feeling stuck in negative emotions. She suggests sitting with the aggression, anger, self-pity or whatever is arising and training oneself not to add guilt or shame on top of it, but rather to practice kindness in the face of this human condition.

4.4. To Think in Terms of Love

There are activists such as hooks and Ikeda who have increasingly turned towards contemplative practices as a means of not giving into the neoliberal ideology of productivity at all costs (Ahmed 2021). Contemplative activism centers around dignity and respect for all people, or to put it more plainly and simply, a love of people, by refusing to forget that each person has the *bodhicitta* nature within. In effort to create a more just life, contemplative activism approaches engaging with suffering in the world in a way that empowers activists to digest their experiences of pain and suffering. Indeed, love

is an enzyme that helps us digest pain and suffering, transforming them into something noble and beatific. For example, one Buddhist practice, tonglen, intentionally invites the experience of pain, suffering, and anger into conscious experiencing in order to facilitate an embodied recognition (remembrance) of our capacity to remain present in the face of that which we have been taught to turn away from. This powerful practice empowers activists to expand their capacity to consciously digest emotions that are normally numbed or ignored in Western culture, while simultaneously cultivating deep compassion for self and other.

We now return to the statement that education must turn its focus to the healing curriculum of *sati* and other wisdom traditions. People need to engage with this life in a way where they are skilled in healing, a turn towards a great love of self and/in other. In a conversation with bell hooks and Chödrön (2017) reminds, “(t)here is a famous saying that from great suffering comes great compassion. Well, from great suffering can come great compassion, or from great suffering can come great hatred. Maybe someone like you could really work on that message right there. From great suffering can come great openness of heart, a great sense of kinship with others, or from great suffering can come hatred, resentment and despair” (hooks and Chödrön 2017, 48 paragraph). Through the various practices of *sati* that increase our capacity to work with suffering and to remember our interbeing, we learn how to eventually stop the cycle of suffering that leads to more suffering. In engaging with such embodied practices that are sustained by a loving approach, the root Three Poisons (hatred, greed and ignorance) can be transformed, leading us toward a more hopeful future.

5. Hopeful Future

We began this paper with a proposition that the Buddha was an educator and a healer and that he designed an educational program devoted to the healing of suffering in humanity. The foundation of his healing program is philosophical in nature, in that the healing is to take place through waking up from our collective and individual delusions about who we are and how the universe and the world operate. This is wisdom. Let us remind ourselves that philosophy is love (*philo-*) of wisdom (*sophia*).

Delusion means not being in coherence with and attunement to reality. However, determining what is reality and what is not reality is not a deductive exercise that starts with a first-order proposition of what is real and what is not. Rather, this is discovered through collective and individual experiences, especially within experiences of suffering. The consequence of living in delusion is coming to harm towards the self and others, sooner or later and subtly or disastrously. It is the recurring occurrence and presence of suffering and harm that in fact signals to us that we are not living in accordance with reality as Interbeing. Suffering from harm naturally ends when we wake up from the delusion and align and attune ourselves to Interbeing. And to help and support each other to do so is education’s major aim and its *raison d’être*.

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Notes

¹ For more on The Second Arrow, see here: <https://tricycle.org/magazine/second-arrow/> (accessed on 3 April 2022).

- 2 The Three Dharma Seals (impermanence, no self, nirvana) are explained succinctly by Hanh (1987) here: <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-practice-of-looking-deeply/> (accessed on 3 April 2022).
- 3 Like all key concepts in a complex philosophical system with a long history, such as Buddhism, the concept of Ignorance is treated with various kinds and levels of explication and interpretation within different schools and traditions. Please consult scholars such as Peter Harvey (1990); David Loy (2003); Alex Wayman (1957); Robert Thurman (1999).
- 4 More on the Three Poisons (greed, hatred, ignorance), here: <https://www.lionsroar.com/what-are-the-three-poisons/> (accessed on 3 April 2022).
- 5 Recommended video lecture on the Three Dharma Seals by Sr Chân Đức.

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