

THE MINDFULNESS PRACTICE, AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, AND CREATIVE DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the degree to which the Buddhist mindfulness practice and the habits of democratic citizenship can be reconstructed in light of each other. We ask what mindfulness is, seeking to first understand it in its Buddhist context. Then we turn to the work of John Dewey in order to seek possibilities for mutual reconstruction. Finally, we ask how we can reconcile mindful acceptance of the present with the ameliorative habits of the democratic citizen—and what this might mean for a reconstructed progressive education practice.

Like yoga before it, the Buddhist mindfulness practice is sweeping across North America. As only one example, *Time* magazine, discussing the Center for Disease Control's recent report on mindfulness in the workplace, led its story with the claim that "the American workforce is becoming more mindful."¹ A growing number of Americans are now just as likely, it seems, to meditate as they are to pray, and the Four Noble Truths have, for some, surpassed the Ten Commandments as the foundation for a life of meaning and purpose.

The above picture is, no doubt, a caricatured portrait. But it captures, we believe, an evolving trend that needs further attention. In this paper, we seek to explore some of these changes in North American culture in our role as educators. In particular, we ask whether the focus on mindfulness—rooted in a religious tradition that goes back thousands of years—can be meaningfully reconciled with notions of public education, democratic activism, and social meliorism.

While mindfulness is a practice that can be linked to diverse religious traditions, we seek to understand it within the context of Buddhism, which was brought to North America in different waves and through various channels.² There have been a number of Buddhist teachers who have come to the United States to teach Buddhism, including D. T. Suzuki (from Japan), Thich Nhat Hanh (from Vietnam), Chogyam Trungpa (from Tibet), Henepola Gunaratana (from Sri Lanka), and S. N. Goenka (from India). In addition, in the decades after the Second World War, young Americans traveling throughout Asia came into contact with Buddhist

teachers. They brought Buddhism, especially Theravada Buddhism, back to the US. This group includes such figures as Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Mirabai Bush. Finally, it can be said that Buddhism came to North America along with the waves of immigrants who were fleeing the conflicts that raged across Southeast Asia throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

In this way, American exposure to Buddhism has moved from the fat or laughing Buddha statues seen in various Chinese enclaves across North American cities, to being one of the most liberal and hip religious practices around, embraced by celebrities that, on at least one internet list, include names like Jennifer Aniston, Angelina Jolie, Boy George, Alex Rodriguez, Tiger Woods, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg. Buddhism and mindfulness have gone mainstream.

Despite the diversity of people who now embrace Buddhism as some part of their spiritual practice, both venerable teachers and new followers alike tend to agree that, at the heart of Buddhism sits the mindfulness practice. Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the most visible faces for North Americans interested in Buddhism, has stated that, “mindfulness must be the basis of your practice.”³ This message is consistent across his teachings. Across the past several decades, then, mindfulness practices have become increasingly visible in North America.

Mindfulness has made its way into the fields of medicine, psychotherapy, business, and the military.⁴ Not surprisingly, therefore, interest in the integration of mindfulness practices into the field of P-16 schooling has also arisen.⁵

Along with its importation into the North American scene, mindfulness has experienced a major discursive transformation. To ensure its survival and development in this new land, mindfulness teachers have sought to divorce mindfulness from its religious and ethical components and turn it into a spiritual path accessible to people of all cultural and religious backgrounds. In other words, mindfulness and the discourse around it have been secularized. People now just as often seek “freedom” as “nirvana” as the fruit of the practice of mindfulness; they go to mindfulness retreats rather than visit Buddhist temples; and they pay tuition fees for mindfulness courses rather than make donation to monks.

All of these changes pose a number of questions for educators. Foremost among these questions, we think, are the degree to which mindfulness practices can be respectfully but creatively adapted to the needs of different cultures, the potential for such practices to support creative thinking skills, and the concern that mindfulness practices might apprentice students into passive acceptance of what is rather than critical engagement with what might be, that is, the degree to which it can be reconciled with the hope of democratic social change.⁶

In this paper, drawing upon our own cultural backgrounds and spiritual interests, we will analyze these issues by putting the Vietnamese Theravada Buddhist tradition of the Buddhist mindfulness practice into dialogue with the work of John Dewey. We explore the degree to which the Buddhist mindfulness practice

and the habits of democratic citizenship can be both understood and reconstructed in light of each other. We will do this in three sections. First, we ask what mindfulness is—seeking to first understand it in its Buddhist context. Second, we turn to the work of John Dewey in order to seek possibilities for mutual reconstruction. Finally, we end the paper by exploring the possibilities for an engaged Buddhism that can intellectually and ethically dialogue with secular democratic theory and practice. In particular, we ask in what ways we can reconcile mindful acceptance of the present with the ameliorative habits of the democratic citizen—and what this might mean for a reconstructed progressive education practice.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

In this section, we explore the role of mindfulness in Vietnamese Theravada Buddhism.⁷ Our goal here is to situate a key source for much contemporary mindfulness practice within a particular cultural and theoretical milieu. We feel this is important, given that there is no single theory or creed of Buddhism—only a long-standing dialogue and interchange among diverse traditions, practices, and cultures.

The Mindfulness Practice of Vietnamese Theravada Buddhism

Buddhism came into existence in response to human suffering, specifically *samsara*, or the cycle of birth and death. The core teachings of Buddhism revolve around the Four Noble Truths, which are about the fact of *dukkha* (often translated as “suffering”), the arising of *dukkha* (due to craving and clinging), the cessation of *dukkha* (through cessation of craving and clinging), and the means or path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* (the Eightfold Path). This is the essence of Buddhist doctrine agreed upon by all traditions, which only differ in how they practice this doctrine. It should be noted that the Buddha advised his disciples to consider his teachings as a finger pointing to the moon, not the moon itself; a raft to reach the other shore, not the other shore itself.

As noted, *dukkha* is usually translated into English as “suffering,” but the suffering that Buddhism refers to is not general suffering, but rather, psychic suffering. For example, if we are hungry, we are definitely suffering. Yet this is not the main concern of Buddhism. Rather, Buddhism is mainly concerned with the suffering caused by greed, hatred, and delusion (called “the three poisons”). For example, when one mistakes a rope for a snake, one feels scared and runs away. This is an example of suffering caused by delusion, which is a concern of Buddhism. The Buddha taught that with the mindful meditation practice, one could see reality as it is, based on one’s immediate, firsthand experience, and therefore escape from suffering. The primary aim of Buddhist meditation is liberation from psychic suffering.

The path to this liberation is the Eightfold Path, which includes right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation. The meditative inquiry is the practice of all these eight paths simultaneously. However, many Buddhist teachers believe that of these

eight components, right mindfulness is the leading one—the heart of Buddhist meditation—because the other ones depend on it. Here is what Thich Nhat Hanh said about the centrality of mindfulness in Buddhist meditation:

Right Thinking is a practice, and its essence lies in mindfulness. If you are not mindful, your thinking cannot be right. If you are not mindful, how can you practice Right Speech? You can make a lot of people unhappy and create a war within your community or family. That is why mindfulness in speaking is the heart of right speech. Right Action—not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, etc.—cannot be practiced properly unless mindfulness is the foundation of your being. The same applies to Right Livelihood; if you are mindful of the ecosystem and the suffering of other species, your attempt to practice Right Livelihood has a chance to succeed. If you are not mindful about what is happening to the earth, the water, the air, the suffering of humans and animals, how can you practice Right Livelihood? Mindfulness must be the basis of your practice. If your efforts are not mindful, those efforts will not bring about the good result you hope for. Without mindfulness, the more effort you make, the more you can create suffering and disorder. That is why Right Effort, too, should be based on mindfulness.⁸

However, it must be noted that while mindfulness is the heart of Buddhist meditation, it cannot be substituted for the other components of the Eightfold Path, and most importantly, it must be viewed and practiced in the light of the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion.⁹ Without the serious consideration of these three poisons, the mindfulness practice easily turns into a psychotherapeutic technique, not a Buddhist spiritual practice.

If mindfulness is at the heart of Buddhist practice, then, what is it? According to Thich Nhat Hanh,¹⁰ mindfulness practices can be reduced to two key words: “here” and “now.” To live mindfully is to live the here and the now to the fullest. But what does that mean? He answered this question by telling a poetic story about a river running after the clouds, with much disappointment, only to realize, eventually, that the only way to be happy is to stop running. Once it stops running after the clouds, the river begins seeing the blue sky within itself.

The mindfulness practice, which is, at essence, the cultivation of happiness, means to stop running after fantasies and speculations, to see deeply and clearly, and appreciatively embrace what is actually happening in the present moment. Put more fully, mindfulness is the practice of observing one’s own body, feelings, mind, and objects of the mind in the present moment, nonjudgmentally, and in the interaction with the living environment.¹¹

In the first place, mindfulness means being attentive to what we are doing and appreciating what we have access to, in the present moment—which means the conventional sense of time and space is gone. We are not pulled or dragged away

by the past or the future, but we are simply present with the unfolding of every moment. For example, we are aware that we are walking from the parking lot to the office, when it is windy and chilly outside, and the fall is in the air. We do not walk quickly and mindlessly in order to get to the office without paying attention to our steps, the surrounding environment, and the feelings that arise through these moments. The process of walking is no less important than the moment of arriving at the office—it is a means, but also an end in itself.

“Nonjudgmentally” is an important but easily misleading component in the above definition of mindfulness. For example, when we observe our breaths, we just observe them as they are, without trying to control them. We do not say, “my breath is too short, I must make it longer.” Nor do we say, “I am stressed about this upcoming meeting, I must relax.” When we see or feel something, we see or feel it with “bare attention.” We see or feel it as it is; we do not judge it or try to control it. We respect its “suchness.” Nonjudgment is emphasized in the mindfulness practice because judgment is perceived as a barrier to open-mindedness, and is also a manifestation of ego-centeredness, which is the root of suffering. This is what the Buddha said to his disciple Bahiya, right after which Bahiya attained enlightenment and became an *arhat* (a Buddhist saint):

Herein, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: “In the seen will be merely what is seen; in the heard will be merely what is heard; in the sensed will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized.” In this way you should train yourself, Bahiya. . . . When, Bahiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen . . . in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be “with that.” When, Bahiya, you are not “with that,” then, Bahiya, you will not be “in that.” When, Bahiya, you are not “in that,” then, Bahiya, you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.¹²

The knowing produced by bare attention is mere and natural knowing, as opposed to conscious knowing, which is “overdetermined” by previous knowledge, experiences, perceptions, or prejudices.¹³ When we meet a person affiliated with a certain cultural background or a certain social role, we may not know her as she really is if we let our conditioned assumptions about her interfere with our knowing. Also, who this person is at present may be different from who she was yesterday or who she will be tomorrow. Therefore, we do not let our knowing about her yesterday compromise our knowing about her of today or tomorrow.

According to Vien Minh,¹⁴ life is already perfect in its own way, but it can turn into a source of suffering if we want it to be perfect on our own terms. The Buddhist mindfulness practice is basically about seeing things and people as they are, at the present moment, not as they should be, will be, or must be, according to our personal standards and speculations. In this sense the mindfulness practice is also a process of overcoming ego centeredness.

What is the Object of Mindful Awareness?

As defined above, mindfulness is the practice of observing one's body, feelings, mind, and objects of the mind, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally, and in relation to the living environment.¹⁵ If there is pain in the body, we see clearly that the body is in pain; if we are disappointed, we see clearly that we are disappointed; if we find ourselves on a busy, chaotic street, we see clearly that we are on a busy, chaotic street. Upon seeing clearly the pain, the disappointment, or the chaotic street, we may respond to them in a certain way, but with the spirit of *vô tác* ("nonexpectation").

It is worth noting that this "seeing clearly" must be situated in the setting of the living environment—seeing clearly is not done in isolation. There is never total isolation, and the attempt to isolate oneself from the world for the sake of the mindfulness practice may be a manifestation of the controlling mind: we try to isolate ourselves in order to attain something. The living environment refers to all elements that a person is in contact with, such as particular people, particular circumstances, or particular social settings. Thich Vien Minh emphasized that "enlightenment is only possible in the interaction with others."¹⁶ The surrounding environment, he explained, functions as mirror, reflecting the status of one's body, feelings, and mind, and thanks to this mirror we can know how ego centered we are. In short, the mindfulness practice does not suggest an escape from the world; in contrast, it must be done within this world—whether that world is constituted by a family home, a monastic community, or even a remote hermitage. The key to the mindfulness practice is to flip one's inner attitudes towards this world—away from craving towards nonattachment, away from anger towards compassion, and away from delusion towards wisdom.

In short, within the Vietnamese Theravada tradition, mindfulness is about our interaction with the living environment in which we find ourselves. In fact, it is correct to say that the "living environment" is the whole in which subject and objects find their meaning. Our subjective awareness is part of the living environment. "Seeing clearly" does not mean seeing reality in some perspectiveless and objective manner; rather, it is seeing clearly the way in which our own fear, greed, and desire shape reality. Once those are let go, we are left with a sense of impermanence—moment-by-moment arisings and fadings.

CAN WE RECONSTRUCT A NOTION OF DEWEYAN MINDFULNESS?

Not surprisingly, John Dewey did not explicitly devote any of his work to the topic of the mindfulness practice, much less the relationship between the mindfulness practice and creative democracy. Therefore, any attempt to examine these topics within a Deweyan frame of reference necessarily involves a reconstruction of Dewey's thought. The reconstruction we will undertake here will happen in two stages.

First, we will look at Deweyan mindfulness as it interacts with his instrumentalism. Then, more importantly, we will look at Deweyan mindfulness as it interacts with his reflections on qualitative thought.

Mindfulness as It Relates to Dewey's Instrumentalism

If we define mindfulness practices as those acts which simply require “giving full attention to the here and now,” without regret for the past or anxiety for the future, then at first glance, it would appear that Dewey's instrumentalism rules out any close links with mindfulness. For Dewey is quite clear that past and future are always bound up with the present. Any intelligent activity always considers the present in light of past and future.

Dewey's instrumentalism leads us to see that the future enters into the present as an aim, that is, as an aspect of the present that we want to focus on and draw out. Therefore, external aims, those provided by someone else, from outside the unfolding temporal stream of current activity, are really no aims at all: “the external idea of the aim leads to a separation of means from end, while an end which grows up with an activity for its direction is always both ends and means, the distinction being only one of convenience.”¹⁷

A Deweyan reconstruction of mindfulness, then, points to the importance of mindfully working with the situation *as it is*, but this “is-ness” is always understood for its potential for organic outgrowth and unfolding of activity, so as to achieve some desirable end. As Dewey says in *Democracy & Education*:

To foresee a terminus of an act is to have a basis upon which to observe, select, and to order objects and our own capacities. To do these things means to have a mind—for mind is precisely intentional purposeful activity controlled by the perception of facts and their relationship to one another. To have a mind to do a thing is to foresee a future possibility; it is to have a plan for its accomplishment; it is to note the means which make the plan capable of execution and the obstructions in the way . . . Mind is the capacity to refer present conditions to future results, and future consequences to present conditions.¹⁸

Mindfulness, from this perspective, is the ability to see the present clearly, but in light of the possibilities that human intervention might bring about.

In this way, foresight enriches present sight. Yet Dewey's focus on instrumentality, potentiality, and social amelioration might also lead us to think that any Deweyan theory of mindfulness will not accord well with Buddhist practices of mindfulness as we have described them in the previous section. For Dewey's “now” seems too evaluative—that is, it seems to accept the now only in so far as it permits of a richer and fuller future. While the desire to live richly and fully is itself a primary aim of the Buddhist mindfulness practice, it cannot be put off until a “better” future arrives. The “now” is all we ever have.

Mindfulness as It Relates to Dewey's Notion of Qualitative Thought

Yet as Jim Garrison pointed out in his 2012 John Dewey Memorial Lecture, Dewey's instrumentalism does not wholly encompass his theory of mind. Garrison noted that Dewey's stance is that our primary relationship towards the world is anoetic—it is “had” and “felt” before it is “minded” or “cognized.”¹⁹ Mind, in the sense described above, is not the primary way we orient ourselves toward the world. Rather, aesthetic intuition is. As Garrison wrote, the “intuitive discernment rests with the perception of something *had* before it is fully cognized . . . anoetic intuition precedes conception.”²⁰

This is an essential point for any reconstruction of Dewey's thought in alignment with Buddhist notions of mindfulness. Later in that same lecture, Garrison is even more emphatic about the role that Dewey's later writings on aesthetic experience should be accorded in his overall thought:

The great evil committed by many of Dewey's critics arises because they confuse his instrumentalism with his entire philosophy. . . . We must not forget the distinction between mediating instrumentalist artistic production and immediate consummatory aesthetic enjoyment of product.²¹

This is to say, then, that Dewey made a place in his thought for both instrumentalist, means-ends reasoning about the present and immediate consummatory aesthetic appreciation and beholding of the present. Of the latter, Dewey gave examples from all walks of daily life: finishing a piece of work, solving a problem, eating a meal, playing a game, or engaging in conversation. In each of these actions, when done well, there is “a consummation and not a cessation.”²² As he noted, “such an experience is whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency.”²³

And, of course, this is all the more true given Dewey's firm commitments to pedagogical principles. If the present were only valuable in the potential it provides for future ends, then children would not be valued as children, but only as future adults (and differently abled children would not be valued at all, but seen only as defective variations). Dewey rejected this line of reasoning at every turn. He was clear that a “living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims.”²⁴ It is only a belief in fixed ends—ones that somehow regulate all growth and change—that would seek to contradict or violate such “absolute claims” of the self-sufficiency of the present. Fixed ends do not exist. There is no template after which all human being is or should be fashioned. Our notion of what is possible for us as human beings is ever evolving and is found through a continual and loving acceptance of what is.

The possibilities that exist for us as human are found, then, through mindfulness—whose Buddhist understanding Dewey comes quite close to capturing in the opening pages of *Art as Experience*:

But all too often we exist in apprehension of what the future may bring, and are divided within ourselves. Even when not overanxious, we do not enjoy

the present because we subordinate it to that which is absent. Because of the frequency of this abandonment of the present to the past and future, the happy periods of an experience that is now complete because it absorbs into itself memories of the past and anticipations of the future, come to constitute an esthetic ideal.²⁵

He goes on to note: “Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive.”²⁶

Clearly, then, Dewey recognized states of mind and being where instrumentalism was in abeyance, if for only a moment, when the human being is fully alive, consummated, and whole. In the next section, we explore “to what” Dewey thought we are fully alive, consummated, and whole when we are mindful.

What Is the Object of Mindful Awareness?

As we have already seen, simple definitions of the Buddhist mindfulness practice such as “fully attending to the here and now” can sound vague and even misleading. They are true as far as they go, but they beg the question: What makes up the here and now? What is the here and now?

The answer, as we saw above, is (1) the such-ness of the developing situation and/or object of experience, and (2) our acceptance or nonjudgmental and clear noticing of said such-ness. It is seeing things as they are, without judgment, fear, or anxiety. When, as they inevitably do, judgment, fear, or anxiety arise within us, mindful noticing of such feelings as a way of avoiding becoming fully entangled in them is recommended. Creating or finding small gaps between the “experiencing subject” and the “observing subject” is the means toward mindfully working with our feelings. In all of this, the focus is on our engagement with the living environment—*not* withdrawal from it. Mindfulness is mindfulness of our relationality with the world.

Dewey’s emphasis on anoetic intuition meant that he had to work out a theory that adequately described the contents of our intuitive acts. He did this in his essay, *Qualitative Thought*.²⁷ In that essay, Dewey noted the important relationship between situation and feeling—or, put in a different way, what Dewey might have called “felt relations.” Such felt relations anchor us in situations that are meaningful—they constitute the background towards which Buddhist thought says we direct our mindful awareness.

For Dewey, situations are the implicit background against which all thoughts takes place and receives its guidance. Situations, as contexts in which “the quality of the whole permeates, affects, and controls every detail,” are forces that focus and guide mind in its interaction with the world. It is situations that enable us to “keep thinking about one problem without our having constantly to stop to ask ourselves what it is after all that we are thinking about. We are aware of it not by itself but as the background, the thread, and the directive clue in what we do expressly think of.”²⁸

In other words, a situation contains a “quality” that the subject first feels—before later coming to frame the quality as a whole with constituent parts that are in need of further analysis. “All thought in every subject begins with just such an unanalyzed whole”—that is, it begins with a situation that is felt to be constituted by a certain quality. Such qualities are intuited in ways that “may be relatively dumb and inarticulate and yet penetrating; unexpressed . . . yet profoundly right.”²⁹

To stop here, however, would be to severely limit the scope of mindfulness in our lives. If we were mindful only as we commenced thought, only in the face of a qualitatively defined situation that was emerging into a problem, its power would be limited to the initiation of experience. But as we noted above, Dewey also preserved a space for *consummatory* anoetic experience. This consummatory experience would have two parts: (1) the sense of having successfully resolved a situational quality into its distinct relational part; and (2) the ability to appreciate the pleasing qualities of the resolution—its harmony, its elegance, and its strength.

In this way, we can view mindfulness as arising out of and merging back into anoetic intuition. Dewey claimed it is the pure ejaculation that best speaks to such moments:

Such ejaculatory judgments supply perhaps the simplest example of qualitative thought in its purity. While they are primitive, it does not follow that they are always superficial and immature . . . they may also sum up and integrate prolonged previous experience and training, and bring to a unified head the results of severe and consecutive reflection . . . they come at the beginning and at the close of every scientific investigation. These open with the “Oh” of wonder and terminate with the “Good” of a rounded-out and organized situation.³⁰

We live our lives in and through the “oh” and the “good”—if we are attentive to the situations in which we find ourselves. While Dewey spoke of these ejaculations as judgments, they might instead be seen as moments of temporary stasis, in which “all is right with the world.”

In this way, we see that mindfulness is indeed possible within each moment of our lives—running along a continuum of initial felt relations of quality to consummatory aesthetic experience of the resolved whole. Throughout, what we are mindful of is the enveloping context that Dewey called a situation. This situation is defined by a “quality” that “lives, acts and endures” as such.³¹

Mindfulness, then, can be considered conscious awareness of our anoetic intuitions, the ability to observe our felt relations to the world, as they come up. Thought—as the more active and formal manipulation of qualities as they become distinct within our minds—will take place along the anoetic pathway that constitute our primary relationship with the world.

HOW DOES MINDFULNESS RELATE TO “CREATIVE DEMOCRACY”?

In his 1939 article, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” Dewey introduced and analyzed the concept of creative democracy.³² According to Dewey, democracy is not just a matter of national politics and government, but is rather a matter of each individual’s attitudes towards self and others. Democratic institutions do not guarantee democracy—rather, it is democratic attitudes that ensure that institutions remain democratic. It is no exaggeration, then, to say that democracy depends upon mindfulness—our ability to bring our loving acceptance to each situation as we find ourselves enveloped within it.

But what of our acceptance of this “what-ness” or “such-ness?” Doesn’t such acceptance shut down possibilities for the ameliorative action that Dewey so admired? Framed in more conventionally Deweyan terms, does consummatory esthetic appreciation of the world deaden us to its injustices and ugliness? This is the question that any robust theory of mindful democratic education would seem to need attention.

It is well known that Dewey’s concern about experience was a concern for the experience of the other as well as the experience of the self. In *Experience and Education*, he famously asked why we “prefer democratic and humane arrangements to those, which are autocratic and harsh?” His answer, of course, was that “democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life.”³³ It is wide accessibility to high-quality experience—consummatory esthetic experiences—that interested Dewey.

This was a radical statement to make at the outset of World War II, and it is equally radical today. It is not just the equitable distribution of food, shelter, and clothing, or to work and leisure, that makes a society democratic—the Soviet Union had, to some degree, already achieved these goals. Much less is it the existence of any set of institutions, like a free press or free public education. Those things mean little absent the individual’s willingness to use them to promote his or her own freedom and the freedom of others.

Rather, democracy is about the quality of the experiences of *all* its citizens. Or, rather, the insistence that in a democracy, all people should have genuine consummatory experiences. They all, to a one, should learn to intuit the qualities of situations, to experience their tensions and the flux, and work to resolve them back into pleasing wholes. The “oh” and “good” of everyday life should be extended to all. Mindfulness would be the birthright of every democrat.

At about the same time as he was finishing *Experience and Education*, Dewey penned his aforementioned essay on creative democracy. Concerned about the threat of fascism, both abroad and at home, Dewey argued that democracy was “a *personal* way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life.”³⁴

In all of this—that democracy entails commitments to educative experience for all at the same time as it is “a *personal way of individual life*”—there is a clear acknowledgement of the primacy of relationship—in this case, the relationship between self and other. In this way, it is quite close to what we might call “expansive mindfulness”—being expansively mindful to what Thich Vien Minh calls the “living environment” and to what Dewey calls the “situation.”

In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey worked to define the “situation” as something more than the immediate and obvious “here and now.” He wrote:

In a genuine sense every act is already possessed of infinite import. The little part of the scheme of affairs which is modifiable by our efforts is continuous with the rest of the world. The boundaries of our garden plot join it to the world of our neighbors and neighbors’ neighbors. That small effort which we can put forth is in turn connected with an infinity of events that sustain and support it. . . . When a sense of the infinite reach of an act physically occurring in a small point of space and occupying a petty instant of times comes home to us, the meaning of a present act is seen to be vast, immeasurable, unthinkable. This ideal is not a goal to be attained. It is a significance to be felt, appreciated.³⁵

The “vast, immeasurable, unthinkable” of the present calls for a very expansive form of mindfulness, indeed. In it, we are led to a mindful appreciation of the qualities that underlie not just our own time and space, but something bigger—the very interconnectedness of all beings. Feeling the interconnectedness of all beings—or what Thich Nhat Hanh,³⁶ in his writings on Engaged Buddhism, called “interbeing”—is the key to resolving the self-other dualism that Dewey worked so hard to avoid.

How do we finally attain such engaged mindfulness? As is often the case with Dewey, the answer comes through art—but also through a mature religious insight:

It is the office of art and religion to evoke such appreciations and intimations; to enhance and steady them till they are wrought into the texture of our lives . . . there is a point in *every* intelligent activity where effort ceases; where thought and doing fall back upon a course of events which effort and reflection cannot touch. There is a point *in* deliberate action where definite thought fades into the ineffable and undefinable . . . The religious experience is a reality in so far as in the midst of effort to foresee and regulate future objects we are sustained and expanded in feebleness and failure by the sense of an enveloping whole.³⁷

Art and religion are the pathways by which we are led toward our mindful engagement with situations that are, in truth, without border. Mindful appreciation of the “enveloping whole,” the way in which the Earth and all creatures within it sustain and support us, is, then, the way of creative democracy.

The era of Trump brings with it many challenges for creative democrats. But these challenges are no greater than those faced by Dewey and his contemporaries in 1939, nor than those faced by Thich Nhat Hanh and his compatriots in 1963. In

fact, if we view our current situation with expansive mindfulness, we see that our own struggle is actually a continuation of theirs—peace and unity through dialogue and acceptance of the worth of all comers.

Dewey's concern with each individual's attitude towards self and others is the primary consensus point between his theory of democracy and the Buddhist mindfulness practice. Although Buddhism, especially the Theravada tradition, does not have a social agenda similar to that of democratic meliorism, its aim at a personal enlightenment and liberation coincides with what Dewey says about creative democracy. By lessening greed, hatred, and delusion through the Buddhist mindfulness practice, a practitioner brings about the well-being not only within himself or herself, but also into the surrounding environment: our neighborhoods, our communities, and so on out into the globe. This is what Dewey meant by democracy.

Therefore, as far as we are concerned, the mindfulness practice, once properly perceived and practiced, is also the practice of creative democracy. It is equally the cultivation of aesthetic experience. Mindfulness, experience, and democracy—these are, perhaps, strong foundations from which we might continue to reconstruct child-centered progressive education in a global age. As we close, then, we wish to link what we have said here to the classroom—a potentially important site for the practice of mindful, creative democracy.

CONCLUSION

We began this paper by reviewing the contemporary cultural scene—the sweeping embrace of the mindfulness practice across many Western contexts, including, increasingly, the classroom.³⁸ Having linked the mindfulness practices to aspects of Dewey's thought, we wish to end by considering implications for classroom practice.

The mindfulness practice has presumably been adopted by Western educators because it was hoped that it would reduce stress, anxiety, and fear, while lessening distraction among students. Yet it must be clearly acknowledged that much stress, anxiety, fear, and distraction is a result of, among many other factors, the excessively controlling structures of conventional schooling. Without a proper understanding of mindfulness, teachers can easily turn it into a practice that supports oppression and arbitrary social control—rather than a practice supportive of well-being, holistic personal growth, liberation, and freedom.

Consider this as an example: although Buddhist meditation is usually associated with sitting meditation in the lotus posture, it is extremely important to remember that the mindfulness practice does not equal sitting meditation. Formal sitting meditation is *not* required in order to promote aesthetic experience and rich social relationships—two consequences of the mindfulness practice, properly understood—especially for those students are already deprived of the chance to socialize, explore, and learn in loosely structured environments such as recess, physical education, free neighborhood play, and other chances to be outdoors exploring the natural environment.

The starting point for mindfulness education, as most progressive educators would agree, must be the interests and needs of the students themselves. Let us start there, then. The tools for creative democracy are already at hand. The mindfulness practice will not be a panacea for what ails our schools—though, properly understood, it can provide both new perspectives and new possibilities in the pursuit for Dewey’s “great community.”

NOTES

1. MacMillan, “Yoga is Officially Sweeping the Workplace,” para. 1.
2. Fronsdaal, “Insight Meditation in the United States.”
3. Hanh, “Dharma Talk: The Eightfold Path,” para. 9.
4. See Baer, “Mindfulness Training as a Clinical I”; Brown and Ryan, “The Benefits of Being Present”; Forbes, “Occupy Mindfulness”; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, and Walach, “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction”; Kabat-Zinn and Hanh, *Full Catastrophe Living*; Miller, Fletcher, and Kabat-Zinn, “Three-Year Follow-Up”; Purser and Loy, “Beyond McMindfulness”; Rosenbaum & Magid, *What’s Wrong with Mindfulness*.
5. Greenland, *The Mindful Child*; Hyde and Frias, “Mindfulness Education”; Hyde & LaPrad, “Mindfulness, Democracy, and Education”; Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*; Kumar, *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry*; Rechtscheffen, *The Way of Mindful Education*; Schoeberlein, *Mindful Teaching*.
6. Deitrick, “Engaged Buddhist Ethics”; Victoria, *Zen at War*.
7. Although Thich Nhat Hanh technically belongs to the Zen tradition, his teachings are strongly influenced by the Theravada doctrine. On the other hand, Thich Vien Minh, whom we will discuss later in the paper, is a Theravadan Buddhist monk.
8. Hanh, “Dharma Talk,” para. 9.
9. Minh, *Dharma Discussion*.
10. Hanh, *Happiness is Here and Now*.
11. Minh, *Relationship and Interaction*.
12. Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 1627.
13. Here we borrow from Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, whose notion of “over-determination” is helpful for translating Buddhist psychology.
14. Minh, *Life is Beautiful in Its Own Way*.
15. Minh, *Dharma Discussion*.
16. Ibid.
17. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 106.
18. Ibid., 103.
19. Garrison, “2012 Dewey Lecture.”
20. Ibid., 10.
21. Ibid., 17.
22. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 37.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 51.

25. Ibid., 17.
26. Ibid.
27. Dewey, "Qualitative Thought."
28. Ibid., 99.
29. Ibid., 100–01.
30. Ibid., 102.
31. Ibid., 95.
32. Dewey, "Creative Democracy."
33. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 34.
34. Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 341.
35. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 262–63.
36. Hanh, *Interbeing*; Hanh, *For a Future to Be Possible*.
37. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 263–64.
38. See Albrecht, Albrecht, and Cohen, "Mindfully Teaching"; Ergas, *Reconstructing "Education"*; Jennings, *Mindfulness for Teachers*.

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