

Wise Living in a Western World

Biology 510 Final Essay

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhism is both a body of doctrine and a way; the doctrine cannot be understood until applied in personal practice. By learning and exercising the Buddhist teachings, people have become calmer, mindful, more compassionate beings that are cognisant of, and detached from, their suffering. In the current Western society, we are slaves to our suffering; we experience more material attachment and have more tools for distraction and delusion than ever before in history. The study and practice of contemporary Buddhist principles may provide a means to change the Western way of life for the better. In this essay, I will argue that the Buddhist principles of mindfulness and compassion are a central foundation for living wisely.

What does it mean to live wisely?

Before the relationship between Buddhist values and living wisely can be examined, one first has to define what it means to ‘live wisely’. Even after two and a half decades of contemporary wisdom research, a universal definition of “living wisely” or “wisdom” has not been determined. I researched different philosophical, psychological, and religious understandings of wisdom and found that, although the definitions varied, they all describe the concept of wisdom as a multidimensional and multifaceted construct with cognitive, reflective, and emotional elements that lead to a greater understanding of the world (Maxwell, 1984; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

For the purpose of this paper, I will define and explain my understanding of what it means to live wisely. Living wisely is living everyday with the capacity, desire, and the active endeavour to see things as they really are, and to have good judgement, so as to benefit the personal and the collective well-being. I include the capacity, desire, and the active endeavour because living wisely is more than just the ability to live with wisdom, it is the *active* pursuit of living with wisdom. I place strong emphasis on seeing things as they *really* are because humans are susceptible to deception, however a wise person should have the ability and desire to know the truth, including both the positive and negative aspects. Furthermore, to live wisely one must understand and reflect on this truth to have good

judgement for the benefit of the personal and collective well-being. This also involves the emotional dimension of wisdom, which is having a sympathetic and compassionate love for oneself and others, including non-human species.

BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES

Currently, we live in an age of cellphones and social media, allowing us ample opportunity to communicate with people across the country, get up to date information about current events, and watch the latest viral videos. We, quite literally, have the world at our fingertips, however this constant access to technology is causing us to disconnect from what is right in front of us, the present world. This distraction is only amplified by other day to day stresses, such as work or home life. The constant pressure for success and achievement has caused us to become selfish in nature and as such, we have little compassion for other people and even less for other species. Oftentimes, the person that we have the least compassion for is ourselves. In order to live wisely, we need to disconnect from our devices and connect with others and the Earth that surrounds us. The contemporary Buddhist principles of mindfulness and compassion must be incorporated into Western culture in order to live wisely.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the state of being aware and taking note of the internal and external surroundings (Ericson, 2014). Furthermore, it is the moment to moment awareness and sensing of what is happening now, without shying away from information or feelings, even if they are unpleasant (Ericson, 2014). The exercise of mindfulness in Buddhist practice is meant to achieve enlightenment. Different streams of Buddhism define enlightenment differently, however for the purpose of this essay I will define it as a radical change in perception stopping the habitual process of attachment and aversion reactions to sense and mental experiences (Sayadaw, 2006).

Reaching a state of mindfulness is a consequence of the practice of the exploration of one's physical sensations and mental activities. Mindfulness is often practiced by engaging in meditation, such as mindfulness meditation and loving-kindness meditation. Mindfulness meditation involves

resting your mind in a state on non-thought and when a thought comes, watching it pass without the mind getting caught up in it. Loving-kindness meditation is a more guided form of meditation, where you focus on yourself, people you love, acquaintances, strangers, and people you don't like and feel your gratitude, love, and care for them (Ericson, 2014).

How does mindfulness contribute to living wisely?

1. Focus and Awareness

Establishing mindfulness is a practice of increasing alertness and narrowing one's awareness. During mindfulness meditation, the mind must be refocused many times after being distracted by other thoughts. As one practices mindfulness meditation more often, one's ability to focus is enhanced and the process of repeated refocusing decreases. As such, Moore and Malinowski (2009) investigated the differences in attentional functions, using qualitative and quantitative tests, between a group of experienced meditators and a control group that had no meditation experience. The experienced meditators were better able to suppress distracting information and focus their attention than the control group (Moore & Malinowski, 2009). Furthermore, mindfulness practice strengthens the clarity of awareness, ability to widen or narrow attention, ability to focus on the present, and awareness of shifts in focus (Brown et al., 2007).

Heightened attentional focus will allow one to live wisely by seeing things as they really are, without distractions and delusions. Focusing on the present moment without the interruption of social media or external stressors will increase one's awareness of the environment. This awareness will result in better decision-making that is based off truths, rather than delusions. Also, increased awareness and focus will aide in living wisely by improving personal and social skills. Personal skills would be benefited by the ability to focus because it allows one to identify one's goals and be steadfast in reaching those goals, resulting in greater self-satisfaction. As well, more awareness and focus on inner thoughts will result in a better understanding of the self. In social contexts, being more attentive will make one more in tune to the emotions and needs of one's family, friends, and other people one

interacts with. Furthermore, people are more likely to have good judgment for the collective well-being when they understand the thoughts and emotions of others.

2. Emotional Intelligence

Practicing mindfulness alters one's perception, understanding, and reaction to emotions. As such, higher levels of mindfulness have been shown to be linked to greater emotional intelligence (Schutte & Malouff, 2011). Meditators have a better understanding of inner emotions, also known as emotional intelligence, which includes the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and harness emotions effectively in the self and others (Schutte & Malouff, 2011). This allows for people to feel and reflect on their emotions in a productive way, which allows for the development of healthy relationships with others and a good self-concept.

Meditators are also less emotionally reactive, meaning their responses to emotions are less involuntary and intense (Ortner et al., 2007). Meditators have better coping strategies, which contributes to the maintenance and persistence of relationships and acceptance of the stresses of life. Following an argument or receiving bad news, wise people would take a moment to calm down, actively cope with the challenge by doing whatever needed to be done, and then apply the life lessons that they had learned (Ardelt, 2005).

Lastly, meditators experience less stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Shapiro et al., 2007; Farb et al., 2010). A wise person is one who is content with their own self and wants to act in a way that is for the collective benefit. As such, the first step to wisdom is interpreting one's own emotions and arriving at a content state.

What is compassion?

Compassion is the active form of empathy, in which one can understand and relate to the suffering of others and actively try to reduce their suffering. In Buddhism, a compassionate mind is one that is motivated by the desire to cherish other living beings and wishes to relieve them of their suffering (Ladner, 2009). Everyone innately has some compassion, which is most likely exhibited in

their connections to their loved ones. Our compassion is our “Buddha seed” or our potential to become a Buddha. Since all humans possess this seed, we all have the ability to enhance our compassion and become enlightened (Ladner, 2009).

Compassion can be developed for oneself and for other living beings by practice. Buddhist values are interconnected and are in a positive feedback loop with each other. Moreover, the practice of one Buddhist teaching can lead to the development of another, and as such the practice of mindfulness helps develop compassion. Loving-kindness meditation has obvious implications for compassion, as the primary purpose of the practice is to generate compassion for strangers and loved-ones alike. However, mindfulness meditation can also foster compassion. Aiken (2006) conducted qualitative interviews with psychotherapy practitioners who were also established mindfulness meditators. These therapists who engaged in meditation were able to feel and understand their client’s experiences and communicate this awareness to their clients (Aiken, 2006). In this way, mindfulness may allow for therapists to experience and communicate empathy to their clients (Aiken, 2006). Compassion involves the understanding and acceptance of suffering, not just bearing it. After enhancing the ability to be compassionate via mindfulness, the act of compassion should be practiced in everyday life.

How does compassion contribute to living wisely?

1. Self-compassion

When the Dalai Lama first came to the West, he was reportedly stunned by the level of self-hatred and self-criticism of the Western people (Gilbert, 2014). This self-loathing epidemic must be resolved in order to live wisely because, as mentioned earlier in the essay, the development of a positive self-concept is an integral aspect to living a wise life. A study conducted by Neff (2003) concluded that self-compassion entails developing self-kindness and increasing self-reflection, which leads to greater psychological functioning, increased behavioural motivation, higher accuracy of self-appraisals, and better coping mechanisms. A common misconception is that the practice of self-compassion is selfish in nature. However, quite the opposite is true; healthy self-compassion stems from de-emphasizing the

separate self and seeing one's own experience as part of the larger human experience (Neff, 2003). Furthermore, practicing self-compassion may lead to being less self-centered and promote one's compassion for others (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion is also different from self-pity because it involves acknowledging that suffering is not unique to oneself, it is part of the human condition (Neff, 2003). This connection with others allows people to not feel alone in their suffering and decreases self-centeredness. Overall, people with high levels of self-compassion are more likely to consider the personal and collective good while making decisions and judgements.

2. Compassion for others

Once self-compassion is developed, the compassion one feels for other beings can be enhanced. Compassion for both humans and other species contributes to living wisely, however in order for compassion to be wise it must be practiced skillfully. As philosopher Ken Wilber says, "real compassion includes wisdom and so it makes judgements of care and concern; it says some things are good, and some things are bad, and I will choose to act only on those things that are informed by wisdom and care" (Wilber, 2000). Wilber is expressing that not all compassion is wise, moreover blind compassion would involve acting in a way that seems kind, but may actually increase suffering, for example giving a beer to an alcoholic friend when they beg you for it. When exercised correctly, compassion allows for successful social interactions, in which one relates to the needs of all living beings (Klimecki et al., 2012). During decision making, a compassionate person has the best interest for the collective well-being at heart and uses wise compassion to guide judgements and decision-making. Compassion also contributes to the maintenance of one's mental and physical health (Klimecki et al., 2012).

CONCLUSION

The study of Buddhism is not a mystical, grandiose practice intended only for devout monks. Conversely, Buddhism is a welcoming and flexible study that is accessible to all people. Moreover, contemporary Buddhist philosophical principles can be integrated in Western culture to improve our

lifestyles, allowing us to live wisely. The practice of mindfulness and compassion are attainable goals for individuals in Western culture to pursue. However, their execution is not simple, as it involves intense dedication and practice. The integration of mindfulness and compassion into our society will allow for people to become more aware of what is truly happening around them, more secure in themselves, and considerate of other human and non-human species' needs. Overall, this will allow for wise living, in which people actively pursue the understanding of the reality and then reflect and make judgements based on this truth for the good of themselves and others.

Limitations

There are some limitations of my argument because as I have previously stated, there are many different definitions of living wisely. People with different understandings of the concept may not believe that the adoption of Buddhist principles would help them in their pursuit of wise living. Another limitation is that although I focused on philosophical principles of Buddhism, some people of other religious backgrounds may think it is disrespectful to follow the beliefs of another religion and therefore, would not implement these principles in their own lives.

Future directions

After many years living a certain way, the radical shift in one's way of life may seem like an absurd, impossible task. The effective implementation of mindfulness and compassion should be done piece by piece, slowly without the total upheaval of one's current practices. I suggest for one to start with mindfulness by practicing meditation, either formally in yoga classes or informally on one's own time. After practicing meditation once or twice a week, one can try to incorporate it into their daily lives. Hopefully, this practice of meditation will influence compassion and allow for both self-compassion and compassion for others to be enhanced. Overtime, this practice will have direct and indirect effects on one's life, leading to a happier, healthier, and more wise existence.

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