Inward: Vipassana Meditation and the Embodiment of the Self

Reviewed by Joseph Loss

The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya

yossiloss@gmail.com

A Review of *Inward: Vipassana Meditation and the Embodiment of the Self*

Joseph Loss [1]

Inward: Vipassana Meditation and the Embodiment of the Self portrays communities of Vipassana practitioners of the Goenka school in "two non-Buddhist 'Western' social contexts"—the American and the Israeli (8). *Inward* is a timely publication because the mindfulness movement, which draws partly on the Goenka practice of body scan, has risen to unprecedented levels of popularity and relevance. Although many quantitative research studies exist that explore the personal, emotional, and physical effect of mindfulness programs, *Inward* is a refreshing and welcome qualitative study of the impact of Vipassana meditation on the social world that gave rise to the practice. Indeed, Pagis shows how the inward gaze may allow a different kind of sociality.

[1] Muda Institute for Mindfulness, Science and Society at the Sagol Center for Brain and Mind, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya. Email: yossiloss@gmail.com.

Using participant observation fieldwork, auto-ethnography, and micro-sociological research methods, Pagis took part in retreats and weekly group meetings and also conducted interviews with practitioners and teachers in order to "illustrate how vipassana represents a hard, concentrated effort, accomplished with the help of others, to stay away from the self as seen by others" (11). This effort, claims Pagis in the first chapter of the book, is not limited to meditation practice on the cushion but rather spills over into daily life and social relations. What might seem to an outsider to be a personal, internal, and emotional activity is revealed by Pagis to be a communal practice that forms a basis for community. This is an important observation that moves the phenomenon from the field of human psychology and philosophy (in which it is usually interpreted) to the field of sociology: "I argue that the shift to the inner lining of experience is specifically social in nature, involving a new mode of interaction with others. Thus meditation is not merely a psychological act that takes place within individual minds. . . . In this sense, subjectivity and intersubjectivity are so entwined that they need not be studied as distinct phenomena" (150). This study offers an insightful and nuanced analysis of the phenomenology of the practice which is at the center of a new mainstream cultural phenomenon.

In the second chapter, Pagis describes four stages in the historical and cultural process of transforming Vipassana from a monastic practice in Buddhist Asia that is anchored in social institutions into a popular individual practice in Western societies. In the third chapter, she beautifully and eloquently analyzes moments in retreats that shed light on the various ways in which the participants learn from one another in silence how to direct their attention inward. Even the practice of solitary meditation is supported by the presence of others. Pagis's elaborate analysis elegantly moves between the effects of outward and inward attention. Thus, although it may sound as a paradox to some, Pagis shows that Vipassana retreats are an opportunity for "collective solitude." Participants need each other in order to turn their gaze properly inward.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Pagis describes the various ways in which the Vipassana practice of the Goenka school, which includes the internal action of paying attention to physical sensations, solves various issues for the meditators and improves their daily lives. This effect is achieved not through discursive analysis of emotions, as in psychotherapy, but rather through observing the nuances of sensations. Setting aside the social context of the meditator's life and pulling the physical sensations to the foreground of attention is the main mechanism through which Pagis analyzes the effect of meditation practice. She gives special attention to the effect of Vipassana practice on relationships with intimate others. Many practitioners disclosed that Vipassana practice improved their emotional relationships or their ability to adjust to relationship transitions

Help resolving issues and coping with unavoidable difficulties in everyday life are both compelling reasons for practicing Vipassana. However, some practitioners report that the meditation eventually ceased to be effective for these purposes. Yet, instead of abandoning the practice, they transformed it into a way of life. In the sixth chapter Pagis categorizes three life trajectories by which a person becomes a meditator and develops along the path of meditation practice: The first is future-oriented and therapeutic in nature; the second is past-oriented and involves experiencing a personal improvement with the mindset of needing meditation in order to maintain this positive change; and the third turns the practice into a way of life. The third trajectory characterizes the few "serious practitioners."

Last, in the seventh chapter, Pagis categorizes the Vipassana practice as part of a wide spectrum of activities that brings people in both Israel and the United States to turn their attention inward, away from the social world, and thereby change their personal experience. However, some of their attention, claims Pagis, inevitably remains on others and thereby influences the way in which a person looks inward. This is common in many instances of self-help practices, like biofeedback

and tai chi; self-improvement practices, such as gym training and jogging; stage training like dance and music; self-injury like taking drugs and self-cutting; and routine daily practices, such as smoking, eating, and sex. In fact, all human activities stem from the combination of effects of an inward gaze and outward gaze, the person's body and other bodies, self-perception and others' perception of the self. Thus, Vipassana, as Pagis describes it, is a practice like other human actions but is perhaps more extreme in terms of directing attention inward.

At the beginning of her book, Pagis states that she was interested in the differences between the American and the Israeli experience of a Vipassana meditation. However, she quickly discovered through her research that, in terms of class and (non-)religious self-identification, "the audience in the two locations is extremely similar" (9) and the interviews sounded similar, as well. Therefore, she concluded that social context was not relevant for the purposes of her analysis. Indeed, many studies of the naturalization of Buddha-Dhamma of various schools in non-Asian contexts, including non-Western contexts such as South Africa and Brazil, showed that the main bulk of practitioners come from upper-middle class (Clasquin 155-159, Rocha 137, Usarski 164) and certainly, class is a critical and important aspect in social analysis. However, it is not the only variable that matters. Being a middle-class person in the United States carries different meanings and experiences than being a middle-class person in Israel. Similarly, self-identification as "non-religious" may have very different symbolic meanings in different cultural contexts, such as in mostly-Jewish Israel (Loss 84–105) and mostly-Christian United States, along with their different historical trajectories, distinctions, and divisions among Jews in Israel and Christians in America. The anthropological study of secularism and religion provides some important critical understandings of the different symbolic meanings of institutional traditions that many consider "religious" in a variety of contexts. Also, when considering aspects of identity, self-identification is only half of the picture. The way one is being identified by others—individuals, state authorities, and so on—is

not less crucial in order to understand the symbolic meanings that are at stake.

The understanding that each social-cultural-political context produces distinct types of symbolic meanings that are associated with being "religious," "non-religious," or a an upper-middle-class person in that specific context may raise a set of questions concerning some of the themes that *Inward* examines. For instance, one might ask how such different cultural contexts could have similar effects on meditation experiences. Is it due to cultural similarities between the American and Israeli middle-class subcultures to which most of the practitioners subscribe? Or maybe is it because Goenka's teachings touch upon a universal common human nature, as Goenka and his students claim?

Alternatively, if one puts the cultural differences between the two case studies at the center of the analysis, one might wonder what effect the compulsory military service in Israel has upon meditation experiences: how might veteran Israeli soldiers differ from the typical college student in the United States regarding experience with meditation? Or how do the differences between religiosity and secularism, which is markedly different in each of the two cultural contexts, reflect in their respective meditative experiences?

Aside from these questions, Pagis's monograph supplies a valuable and accurate description, as well as a highly sensitive analysis of the happenings in the Goenka Vipassana centers. It weaves together personal experience, theory, and interviews with others to create an elegantly persuasive account that contributes a unique and important exposition to the growing literature of the new cultural field of Buddhist meditation outside Buddhist Asia and also to the sociology of secularity and religion in postmodern times. In addition, it contributes a sensitive phenomenological account of meditation practice that is all the more important now, considering the current flood of quantitative studies on the effects of mindfulness.

Works Cited

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