
Mindfulness – a non-spiritual meditation

Mondo with Roland Yuno Rech - Grube Louise, May 2014

Question: *For ten years we have heard about "deep meditation" and "mindfulness:" particularly with regards to the investigation of Jon Kabat-Zinn in the United States and Christophe André in France. How do you consider "mindfulness"?*

Roland Yuno Rech: The key point is that this is a non-spiritual meditation practice, so therefore we should agree on what is called "spiritual. If we use meditation to get anything whatsoever - remedy stress, overcome depression, increase performance - we are using mediation in the service of the human ego. The more profound meaning of meditation is, however, realized when practice in the spiritual dimension, when we abandon attachment to the human ego. In other words, true meditation begins just beyond these mindfulness exercises. Meditation starts from the moment one becomes "mushotoku." We practice without thought of gaining anything. When we don't practice like this, when we use meditation in pursuit of various and varied goals we are using it to get some kind of result for the little ego. This kind of practice betrays the deeper meaning of meditation: the deeper meaning of meditation within the context of the Buddha's teaching.

However, having said this, I do not condemn mindfulness practiced in this way, however limited, at all, at all, because I think that the practice mushotoku is very difficult. There are people who live in great mental suffering, people who are very stressed, deeply depressed, whose ego is really dilapidated, dysfunctional, whose life is deeply unsatisfying. I think it would be asking too much on their part to be immediately "mushotoku," It is just enough, for the time, to accede to need for their ego to re constitute its stability.

So I think that the teaching of "full consciousness", or "mindfulness" in the therapeutic sense of repairing the ego is good: but, we must emphasize it is the "first level." It is a first approach that may encourage some people to enter a meditation practice they would never have otherwise encountered, because of, maybe, a lack of spiritual motivation. People who might not, for the time, have the psychological capability to imagine giving up anything.

However, it is important for the people teaching this practice to have the honesty to determine the limits of it. And this is exactly what Christophe André has done. I have been on TV programs with him, I invited him to La Gendronnière to train and I believe (at least in my presence) he has this honesty. He has, moreover, at the end of courses told told his students: "If you want to go further, go on sesshin at La Gendronnière".

So – with Mindfulness, with Christophe André – there is great movement there! This "fashion, mode almost - I think it's something that is favorable to meditation. 20 years ago, when someone mentioned "mediation", people immediately thought "sect" – it was frowned upon - "meditation," the word, had a very bad connotation. These days it couldn't be more different, everyone wants to meditate! It's wonderful! I must emphasize though, when we are talking about Dharma Teachers, dojo leaders, Zen Masters, other Buddhist teachers, it is important to make the distinction between this approach, which is the first level, a kind of introduction, and a deeper practice for those who, if they desire, may go further.

At the moment, Jon Kabat-Zinn and Christophe André (who, apart from the practices we have been talking about, have also practiced Buddhism), are able to show the limitations of limited practice. However, the problem is that they also are training therapists who are just looking to earn a better living, to offer more services to their clients: it is these people that I am concerned by, that they are not able to discern and to understand the differences we have been talking about and are not capable of explaining them to their patients.

Also, the problem arises that these techniques can block people who say, "But after all, it's enough for me! Why go further!?" There are people who come in dojos and then rapidly leave and say: "No, I prefer the mindfulness meditation, mindfulness is easier!" But, all things considered, I think the development for 20 years is rather favorable. It's up to all the people who are here, all the others teaching Zen to discuss this with those around them and try to show clearly the difference between mindfulness practices and our Zen practice. Generally, the AZI when we hear "well-being", all godos signal the same distrust and condemnation, saying: "it's a dimension which is almost materialistic." My point of view is that this is not very helpful and it is entirely legitimate to search for "well-being" in life.

Put quite simply, what we need is to deepen, more and more what it really meant when we talk about "well-being". Maybe, when we begin it is about better sleep, less stress, a way out of depression (which are, all the same, things that are very important). But, ultimately, we must ask ourselves what "well-being" truly is.

I think "well-being" is to be in harmony with the essence of our life. To be well is to be awakened. There you go! However, for certain people this would be already too much, this profound aspect of enlightenment – of harmony with the Dharma or Buddha Nature – right now they are simply looking for "well-being" at the level of their current needs. Neither Master Deshimaru nor Buddha condemned ordinary human needs: yet their teachings were able to always show a dimension beyond the ordinary needs of human beings, and so must we too.