
Reviewed by Tyler Carter (Duke Kunshan University)

Published on H-Buddhism (September, 2020)

Commissioned by Ben Van Overmeire (Duke Kunshan University)

In the 2015 article “Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (and why it matters),” the Buddhist studies scholar Robert Sharf argues that severing mindfulness meditation from Buddhist teachings and communities can estrange practitioners from their everyday social relationships with nonpractitioners as well as render these practitioners politically passive. Ironically, Sharf’s critique suggests that the overtly self-diminishing practices of mindfulness, insight, and vipassana meditations can be used to nearly the opposite effect, one that, when observed in the everyday social world, aligns more closely with individualist tracks of Western modernity and ego-driven advancement.

In *Inward: Vipassana Meditation and The Embodiment of the Self*, a book-length ethnography of a particular strand of mindfulness meditation practice called vipassana meditation, Michal Pagis, a sociologist of culture and religion at Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel, provides a response to these critiques by exploring how vipassana’s inward focus plays out not just at the meditation center but in the broader lives of meditators and their intimates. As an inquiry based in sociology, the central questions of *Inward* circulate around what a prolonged inward gaze results in when we examine its social consequences. Or in other words, when this inward gaze is adopted by a group of people, how does this change their interaction with the social world and, further, how might vipassana’s particular mode of subjectivity be linked to the modes of social interaction that spawned it? Thus, Pagis’s ethnography touches on the nature of sociality itself and how the particular inward gaze of vipassana can manifest in everyday life. For scholars of religion and phenomenological sociology, and in particular, scholars of modern meditation practices, *Inward* is a welcome qualitative exploration of meditation’s potential impact on our social world as well as an insightful and in-depth phenomenology of the practice itself.

*Inward* begins with a sociohistorical overview of the roots of vipassana and its rise to popularity in US-American contexts with a focus on how vipassana has taken on different meanings for different audiences. To briefly define the practice, vipassana meditation is the “silent, nonjudgmental observation of the body-mind phenomenon” (p. 8) and is typically lumped in with mindfulness practices or insight meditation. Though vipassana originally was developed in Theravada Buddhist contexts, such as those in Southeast Asia (e.g., Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand), it has grown in popularity beyond this region over the last fifty some years. In particular, S. N. Goenka’s vipassana centers, which is where Pagis learned vipassana and recruited participants, have over two hundred sites around the world, eleven of which are in the
United States. In four stages, Pagis outlines the sociohistorical roots of vipassana, moving from Eric Braun’s historical work on the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw and the British occupation of Burma to romantic European interest in Eastern philosophies to the 1960s counterculture that brought meditation practices to Western soil and finally, to the contemporary explosion of research on mindfulness practices in neuroscience, psychology, and medicine.[1] While much of this ground has already been covered by scholars of various mindfulness practices, Pagis compiles this historical research into a continuous narrative and further builds on it by contextualizing a running count of the potential appeals of vipassana for these different audiences. As a result, a reader is given a kind of historical typology of meditators and their worldly motivations that serves as a broader contextualizing mechanism for the various kinds of socialization practices that Inward delves into in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 focuses on the training, or “pedagogy” of S. N. Goenka’s vipassana centers. Specifically, it discusses the nature of the attention that vipassana practitioners might hold and how this nature is partly socialized through the environment of the meditation centers. Using participant interviews and her own observations while sitting in on these courses, Pagis outlines much of what takes place during a Goenka-style meditation course. These descriptions include seating arrangements that imply a hierarchy of seniority; the shared spaces in the meditation halls, dorms, and cafeteria through which behaviors can implicate progression as vipassana meditators; the use of individual meditation cells, and the unconsciously coordinated waves of movement and noise that sweep the meditation halls over the hours of silence. All told, these behaviors and relationships result in the production of a “hierarchical system of expertise” (p. 53), where through observation, novice meditators can better learn to control their inward gaze. As the course progresses, writes Pagis, “instead of projecting a self to the world and to others, I align my body with other’ bodies and turn my attention inward” (p. 69). Thus, Pagis makes the case that the practice of vipassana habituates people to disengage from the perceptions of others (and the inevitable questions of ego-centered meaning that arise from these perceptions) and engage with a mode of attention that directs the conscious mind to inner sensation. This, in essence, is how Pagis defines vipassana’s inward gaze. In a way, vipassana inverts a typical Western mode of being social where instead of ignoring the body and focusing on people, real or imaginary, vipassana pays explicit attention to the body while subconsciously aligning itself with the bodies of those around it. On the one hand, this inversion can produce affective and emotional insights for practitioners, while on the other, vipassana is still entrenched in a wider social context that has positive and negative implications in the everyday lives of meditators.

The heart of Inward is chapters 4, 5, and 6, respectively titled “Meditation in Daily Life”, “Negotiating Intimate Social Relations”, and “Becoming a Meditator.” These chapters are mostly concerned with understanding what happens to the inward gaze of vipassana when practitioners finish a course and leave the center. Along with participant interviews as well as participant-observer discussions of vipassana, Pagis also offers phenomenological understandings of vipassana that help to ground the reader in an inward-looking theoretical perspective. For example, Pagis begins chapter 4 with a phenomenological understanding of how conventional notions of mental and physical discomfort might be transformed into observable bodily events. Writing about the act of crying during Goenka courses, Pagis writes, “Observing the tears (or any other bodily sensation) for an extended period isolates the sensation from the relevance it carries for acting and engaging with the world, encapsulates it in an inward-looking embodied mode” (p. 77). Vipassana teaches individuals to observe bodily sensation rather than acting to make these sensations disappear. Naturally, this
might change how individuals approach the challenges they face in life, and Pagis outlines some of these challenges including how people work with anger and anxiety, life decisions, work-life balance, and more. All of these experiences are not just narrated but are further analyzed through the phenomenological lens of vipassana. The body scanning, checking, and catching oneself that vipassana teaches thus becomes an underlying habit that many of the vipassana meditators discuss as playing a transformative role in their daily lives.

In the subsequent chapters, on negotiating social relations and how meditators develop (or abandon) their practices over time, Pagis highlights how intimate and family relationships are might be influenced when an individual takes to vipassana. In doing so, she shows how tensions between the inward gaze and outward social world can manifest in ways that modern liberal society evaluates as negative, namely family alienation or reduced interest in sex, as well as in ways that would be seen as positive, such as increasing openness and conflict resolution. As in the chapter before it, the reader is given a phenomenological lens to understand how the development of the inward gaze might impact social relationships and then is taken through a number of different themes including conflict, emotional connection, sexual relations, autonomy, and separation from intimate others. Chapters 5 and 6 in particular paint a picture of the mixed bag of experiences that vipassana meditators might encounter, including the dulling effect that vipassana can have in terms of creative output, relating to nonmeditators, or desire for sexual relationships. Here then the reader finds empirical echoes of some of Sharf’s concerns with meditation; that is, concerns that the inward focus of vipassana can be so radically life-changing that it renders practitioners uncomfortably different from their pre-meditative selves; a difference that can be read as self-absorption at the expense of community. As one participant puts it: “I told [my parents], ‘Remember how I was before vipassana? I used to smoke grass, drink alcohol, I couldn’t work, I couldn’t hold a relationship, and look at me now, at my life and state of mind.’ And they hold back and answer: ‘But you used to laugh more and have a good time’” (p. 119).

Pagis interprets these narrative vignettes in consistently insightful ways, discussing, in this case, how the participant’s family might not miss a given personality trait but a mode of interaction, and more broadly, the social alignments that this individual enabled by being their “old” self. These places where Pagis discusses the negative impacts of vipassana are particularly interesting and refreshing amidst the body of popular literature on contemporary Western meditation that can sometimes regard these meditative practices with starry eyes. On the one hand, vipassana can move practitioners out of self-defeating ruts and ego-centered desires. On the other, it requires a huge amount of energy to negotiate the tension between Vipassana’s inward gaze and the need to maintain warm and intimate social relations.

Pagis also connects these personal experiences to the broader taxonomy of motivations that keep meditators practicing and grounds these experiences in sociology and class. One of the claims that Inward puts forth is that the personal goals of a meditator at a given moment are what ultimately keeps them committed to the practice of vipassana (p. 146). Because many of the folks who find their way to vipassana occupy, in sociological terms of class, “mid-high secular strata” (p. 147), a strata that often holds the right of the individual to pursue their own happiness as one of its highest values, it is not surprising that many of the biographies of these meditators reflect these changing personal goals. Thus, at least for many of the Israeli or US-American meditators that Pagis interviews, it appears that vipassana shares a similar space as psychotherapy, nonreligious spirituality, or everyday exercises like running or yoga. Certainly, as Sharf infers, emotional fulfillment and reduced stress are not “Buddhist” goals (p. 472).
However, instead of defining the value of vipassana via its relationship to Buddhism, Pagis grounds her analysis in the discipline of sociology, where individuals’ motivations are connected to larger cultural phenomena. Though Pagis could be said to make a similar argument as Sharf in terms of recognizing the seeming contradictory goals of Western self-actualization and Buddhist no-self, she does not dwell on this contradiction. Instead, she folds it into a broader analysis of vipassana’s place in contemporary society and further, into the development of a theoretical understanding of vipassana’s transformative inward gaze that can be applied to a secular world.

Thus, in the concluding chapter, Inward makes connections between vipassana, other “subtle-body” practices such as yoga or exercise, and a broader concept of interiority. Here Pagis argues that vipassana and other practices that turn our attention inward are an essential component of the human experience. Vipassana and other subtle-body practices, of which Pagis even includes more “deviant” practices such as self-cutting and drug use, enable us to take a necessary break from how we have been conditioned to see others and ourselves. Writes Pagis, “The social world supplies communities, routines, and rituals, some of which are considered religious, some secular, through which practitioners turn inward to their bodies without stepping out of society. Through such practices we discover how to be both social and corporeal, how to relieve anxiety regarding what others see or think: an embodied transcendence that permits a smooth movement between social relations” (p. 150).

Here then, in connecting vipassana to a broader context and theoretical frame, Inward makes the move that I, as both a vipassana practitioner and fellow scholar of meditation practices, have been looking for. That is, a patient and scholarly treatment of vipassana that builds a theoretical frame capable of extending beyond Buddhism, health science, and/or the esoteric practices of a given meditation community. Pagis’s concept of interiority, in this instance, directly speaks to a long line of modern sociological approaches that includes Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, Irving Goffman’s performative selves, Lev Vygotsky’s social psychology, and to more contemporary trends in phenomenological sociology. In terms of religious studies, Inward adds to the growing body of critical scholarship on secular meditation practices perhaps best represented by David McMahan and Eric Braun’s edited collection Meditation, Buddhism, and Science (2017) and Jeff Wilson’s Mindfulness in America (2014). In fact, Inward can serve as an essential companion piece to these works in that it gives the interdisciplinary study of secular meditation practices some qualitative empirical heft that extends beyond quantitative studies showing meditation’s health benefits and sociocultural treatments of mindfulness’s rise as a cultural phenomenon.

These contributions aside, one weakness of Inward is its occasional uncritical gaze on the role of language and rhetoric in Goenka’s meditation courses. Specifically, the nightly “Dhamma Talks” that occur during the course are nearly absent from both the participant interviews and the discussion of the course itself. In these talks, participants receive quite a bit of Buddhist theory and philosophy, though this theory is not expressed in explicit Buddhist terminology. One wonders what role these teachings may have played in the social world that Pagis paints for us and how the participant’s understanding of their own practice was impacted by the Buddhist theory presented at S. N. Goenka’s vipassana courses. Another example of this sometimes uncritical gaze is the claim that vipassana meditation does not “require a mantra or an external object such as a candle or a picture to focus on” (p. 8). This is a constant refrain during a ten-day course, and I would argue against this claim in that although vipassana does not rely on objects or images to teach vipassana, it does rely on the fairly regimented technique of “body scanning” to enter the meditative state. Perhaps this is
an issue of semantics, but even abstract and mental forms are still forms. A dancer’s moves do not need to be written down, but they are still an object in the minds of the dancers as one learns the moves. Though just two examples, I include them to show what appears to be a slightly uncritical adoption of Goenka’s teachings. This reader wishes for a bit more unpacking of the language and rhetorics used in these courses, which perhaps is another project for another time.

Finally, one last note of praise for Inward: the book is beautifully written. As someone who has attended many courses at a few different centers in the United States, I found Pagis’s descriptions of what was happening at these centers as well as her choice of material to thematize to be uncannily accurate and poignant, at least in terms of my own experience. Not only that, but Pagis weaves theory, participant interviews, and her own personal experience seamlessly together, resulting in a reading experience that continually surprises, engages, and persuades. Inward is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on the secular and religious study of meditation and should be considered essential reading for those interested in the transformative powers of interiority.

Note

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55483