

Ontological Conversion: The Place Of Self-Knowledge, The Contemplative Tradition And Contemporary Mindfulness In Education

Carlos Sousa REIS

Coimbra University, CEIS 20
csreis@uc.pt

Albertina OLIVEIRA

Coimbra University
aolima@fpce.uc.pt

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will try to show how philosophy, psychology and education can still dwell on common issues, namely ontological transformation while using similar insights approaches. This is the case, for instance when we compare Epictetus' spiritual exercises and the current contemplative knowledge stream to which Mindfulness is inserted. By essaying to look for the connection between the stated approaches perhaps we can bring forth some mutual enriching ideas to the mentioned fields.

Vain is the word of that philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man.

Epicurus

But all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.

Spinoza

The longest journey is the journey inward.

Dag Hammarskjöld

INTRODUCTION

There is an ancient but, perhaps, today inadvertent link between philosophy, psychology and education. Since the pre-Socratic endeavours around the concept of "psyché" –from the Greek word ψυχή– until the more contemporary philosophical common set of issues that have been developed, for instance, by Foucault (1999). However, nowadays such a historic and genealogic disciplinary imbrication may not be easily received, much less perceived and, perhaps, neither welcome from some entrenchments coming from both sides.

Fortunately, the work of Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy as a way of life" (1995), has brought attention to the issue, long ago somehow neglected by the Academy, when, in late XIII century, philosophy became more a matter of erudite practice of producing treatises than the expression of an existential option perseveringly sought, which would correspond more accurately to the original meaning of the word: the love for wisdom, while envisaging living accordingly to it. This is, precisely what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) stress as being real philosophy: the art of looking to things anew and creating concepts that insert meanings to life, which allow them to say that the philosopher (the friend of wisdom) killed the Sage (the one who arrogates to own wisdom). As Boyum (2010) explains, philosophical education does not turn out to be merely cognitive or intellectual, simply conveying a knowledge increase –although it is expected that this will also happen–, because it implies a transformation, a change of attitude and character, a transformation of the individual, a kind of conversion, though different people may reach different destinations, with different experiences and different results. Such process presents a very close parallel to current scientific approaches to Mindfulness and the purpose of this study is, precisely, to find the possible connections between both approaches, in order to bring forth some mutual enriching ideas to these two disciplinary fields.

THE REFLECTIVE AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

Epictetus' (55-135 a.C.) *Enchiridion* (1865, 2012) and the *Meditations* (2002) from Marcus Aurelius (121-180 a.C.) are, perhaps, two of the most ancient and relevant references of the Stoic tradition that combined the concept of *Lógos* developed by Heraclitus (535-475 b.C.) with the Socratic quest for virtue, which implies a rejection of the shallow surrender to power, wealth, and fame. Such rejection came to embody the core of the critic carried on by the Cynics, like Antisthenes (465-365 b.C.), who became an ardent disciple of Socrates (470-399 b.C.), after studying

rhetoric with Gorgias (485-380 b.C.). For its part, Antisthenes then became a teacher of Diogenes (412-323 b.C.), from Sinope, who turn out to be considered the archetypal Cynic philosopher and, perhaps, the most renown of all times, as he took Cynicism to its logical extremes.

Stoicism's tripartite origin has, as Dinucci (2012) has shown, a very much consequent demonstration. Relying on Heraclitus they assume that the whole Cosmos is ruled by a divinity, according to his own law, which is the real underlying reason for all phenomena, although men tend to consider them just or unjust –as they live in a specific level of the flux of things–, failing to understand that such perspectives, sometimes apparently contradictory, depend on the circumstances of the subjects who do not realize the more global and profound logic controlling all events. We can make here a parallel with the tectonic plates movement: they move, but not for us, once our perception is not of the same scale. From Socrates, they assume a practical sense of philosophy committed to the indefatigable pursuit of the path to becoming an integral, strong and free man, along with his also paradigmatic use of irony as a critical method to denude the common tendency to adopt preconceived ideas. Many of Socrates' enmities actually sprung from his caustic use of irony. One must not forget that the Cynics indelibly recorded in history their names for posterity because of their ferocious critics upon customs and their very prone orientation to ascetic life.

Regarding the practical sense of philosophy, we can also find it very stark among the Cynics. For them philosophy was not a case of producing treatises and demonstrating some theoretical superiority, above all, it was a way of life – We could also say an “art of living” (“*techne tou biou*”)–, coherently expressed in the way one lives (Hadot, 1995). Following Socrates, what they really search for was a posture of living and so they call for philosophy, taken in its etymologic sense, in order to assist such purpose. That is why the book compiled by Arriano, from Epictetus' classes, was named after the Greek word *enkheiridion* (ἐγγχειρίδιον), which refers to a dagger, a portable weapon or portable book or even a book at hand, made of *apophthegma* (αποφθεγμα), i.e., statements pronounced out loud, as weapons blow.



Figure 1: *Diogenes from Sinope* by John William Waterhouse (1905, oil on canvas - Art Gallery of New South Wales - Sydney, Australia)

Besides, from Socrates the Stoics took another principle, intrinsically intertwined with the above mentioned. In his works, Plato often makes Socrates utter the maxim “know thyself” to motivate the Dialogues, namely in the *Charmides* (164d), the *Protagoras* (343b), the *Phaedrus* (229e), the *Philebus* (48c), the *Laws* (II.923a) and in the *Alcibiades* (124a, 129a, 132c). The credibility of such use is confirmed by Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (1923, 4.2.24), who was another disciple of Socrates (as it is referred by Aristophanes in *The Clouds* (814), which was written to make a mockery of philosophers in general and took Socrates as the “party brass drum”). In fact, Socrates was well aware that the maxim belonged to a long-established wisdom. In Greece was common knowledge that it was inscribed in golden letters on the forefront of Apollo’s temple at Delphi, followed by another admonition from the god to the worshipers entering: “Nothing too much!”. Of course, Socrates knew it very well, as he knew that it was attributed to the seven ancient Sages (Protagoras, 343b), as Pausanias (*Description of Greece*, 10,24, 1-2) confirmed. Socrates used de maxim abundantly and it came to grant him the epithet of being also a sage. In Plato’s *Apology* of Socrates (21a-e), he reports a did of his dear friend Chaerephon: “Well, once he went to Delphi and made so bold as to ask the oracle this question; and, gentlemen, don’t make a disturbance at what I say; for he asked if there were anyone wiser than I. Now the Pythia replied that there was no one wiser.” Socrates was not retelling this to praise himself, rather he wants to made explicit the difference between his humility and the disproportionate sleaze of those that assume to be wise, to know something worthwhile, but after all they did not, while Socrates at least knew he knew nothing for sure when compared to the Divinity: “I thought to myself, ‘I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either.’” So, Socrates came to be known as the philosopher of the “enlightened ignorance”, in what he was afterwards followed by many others over the centuries, who also claimed to focus in the maxim of “know thyself”: Saint Augustin, Peter Abelard, Petrarch, Montaigne, Kant, Hegel, Fichte and Cassirer, just to name a few. We shall get back to this issue in order to consider its relation to contemporary mindfulness theoretical approach, which can claim an oriental and occidental tradition that takes the “Know thyself” precept as a core principle of existence.

It is important to close our discussion by referring three related issues. The first one, is the Socratic and Stoic awareness about the existential difficulty of carry on with the principle, already mentioned by Thales of Miletus, according to Diogenes Laertius (*Lives and opinions of eminent philosophers*, I, 12,15) and also referred in Plato’s *Alcibiades* (132a-e). The second issue concerns the principle that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (*Apology*, 38a), which was paramount for Socrates and the Stoics’ philosophy and way of living and is indeed the spring of all meditation, as well as it has become the basis of current mindfulness. Consequently, we come to realize that the “Delphic precept” has been the pillar of all time for philosophy, ethics, and mysticism, as it is today for mindfulness.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES, EXISTENCE, AND MINDFULNESS

We have stated above that western ancient philosophical tradition was deeply involved in propitiating a reflexive focus on one’s existence, consisting in a practical endeavour with ethical implications. Particularly, the Stoic tradition has developed a reflexive practice bound to open a path for achieving an existential clarification regarding different, although interconnected, fields. Pi rre Hadot presented a sound explanation of such approach, bringing forth the practical purpose of the Stoic philosophy, namely the structure of its reflexive practice while exposing the underlying organization of their work that so many times was erroneously taken as fragmentary. After a long quoting of Philo of Alexandria, Hadot explains:

“it means that philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which has to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life.

For the ancients, the mere word *philo-sophia* – the love of wisdom – was enough to express this conception of philosophy. In the Symposium, Plato had shown that Socrates, symbol of the philosopher, could be identified with Eros, the son of Poros (expedient) and of Penia (poverty). Eros lacked wisdom, but he did know how to acquire it. Philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one’s being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom. Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of their individual’s way of being.

Thus, philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way. [...] The ancients knew that they would never be able to realize wisdom within themselves as a stable, definitive state, but they at least hoped to accede to it in certain privileged moments and wisdom was the transcendent norm which guided their action.

Wisdom, then, was a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness. First and foremost Philosophy presented itself as a therapeutic, intended to cure mankind’s anguish” (Hadot, 1995, 265-266).

While peace of mind implies the development of a “cosmic consciousness” that extends the soul throughout the infinity of universal nature, freedom means, precisely, being independent of all exteriority and the sense that because the rules of nature transcend our will and power we should search for acceptance of what we can not change and envisage it with the eyes of that same nature, let us say its own scale. In few words, it meant one should look for being also at peace with the world, in harmony with the cosmos we are a part of. As to the practical reflexive approach that can mediate such a way of being, it is necessary to distinguish, as the Stoics did, between the *discourse about philosophy* and *philosophy itself*: in the first case, for pedagogical reasons, logic, physics and ethics appear as theories on those matters, although, in fact, they are but parts of philosophical discourse, while “philosophy itself – that is, the philosophical way of life – is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act, which consists in living logic, physics, and ethics. In this case, we no longer study logical theory – that is, the theory of speaking and thinking well we simply think and speak well. We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate it. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way” (Hadot, 1995,267). Philosophy is not about devouring theory books that are then put into discourse but not into practice and conversely, practice is not something extraneous to one’s philosophy, i.e., the way of living could not contradict the discourse one presents. Philosophy is not about producing systematic treatises, rather it should be systematic in producing the striking essential principals that could transform us and frame our lives.

Therefore, philosophizing must be, and it was for Stoicism and Epicureanism, as it was before for Socrates, “a continuous act, permanent and identical with life itself, which had to be renewed at each instant. For both schools, this act could be defined as an orientation of the attention” (Hadot, 1995, 268). It becomes now clear another correspondence with contemporary mindfulness: the crucial role played by attention to one’s own life and the undergoing related inner processes; nothing else but an awareness towards the finitude of life. For Stoicism, it was a paramount issue the purity of intentions through which the conformity of the individual will with reason – the same that ruled the cosmos – could be attained. Such attention, however, comes with a cost, the systematic effort of practicing the adequate meditation exercises: “the ever-renewed awareness of the finitude of life, examination of one’s conscience, and, above all, a specific attitude towards time” (Hadot, 1995, 268). As the only reality that depends on us, the present was then taken as the suffice condition for happiness to be considered, aside the worries of the past and the future. The former can no longer be changed and the later can not be controlled due to its imponderability. One can and must be happy now, paying the right tribute to the incommensurable value of existing. Thus philosophy also obtains an aesthetic function, as it is assumed as a means of carrying on the art of living, by exercising the art of taking care of oneself. A process the ancient Greeks called “*epimeleia heautou*” and then took the designation of “*cura sui*” within the Latin culture. The important thing for the ancient philosophers was the personal work on oneself, the set of a series of practices that constituted a way of being, or a way of life.

We must now focus our attention on the Stoic-Platonic exercises of attention (*prosoche*), a meditation technique that triggers conscience examination, rooted in the sense of our finitude, thus entailing, since Socrates, a preparation to death. As we have seen above, Philosophy as a theoretical approach is pedagogically divided into three disciplines: Logic, Physics, and Ethics. However, aside being forms of discourse, they are foremost about a practical clarification of what we can think, what we can desire and what can we do. Therefore, these three realms configure domains of our freedom, once they depend on nothing else but what it is within our reach. According to the Stoics, we have a fair independence of thinking well, to consider the desires we should follow and the paths to be trodden. The process can be represented as follows (Figure 2)

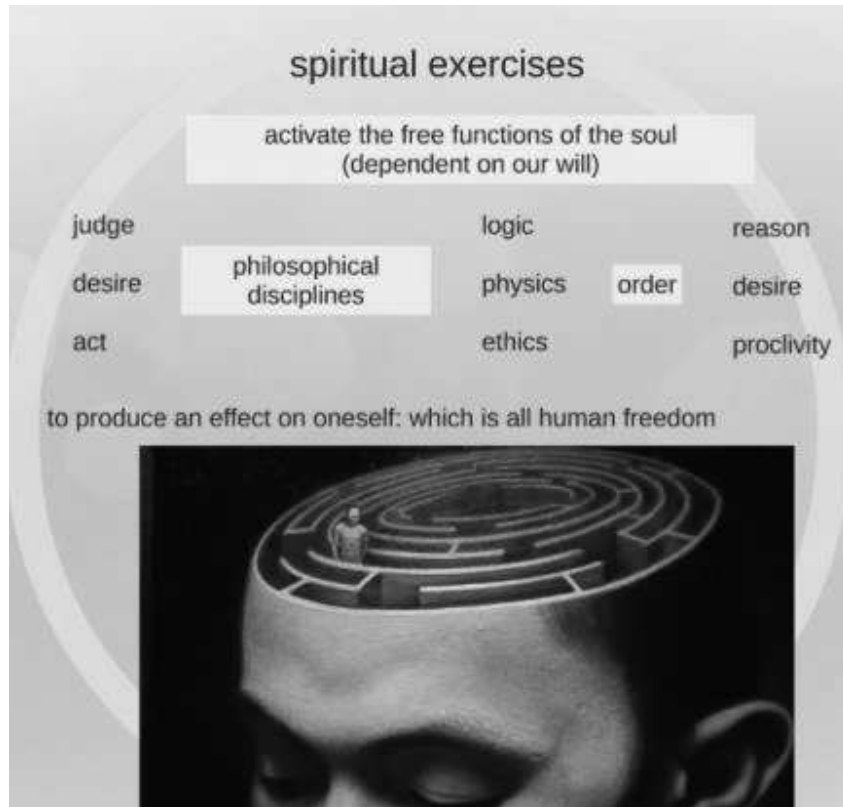


Figure 2: Scheme of Epictetus' spiritual exercises

When we activate the free (i.e. depending on our will) functions of the soul (to judge, to desire and to decide how to act), which correspond to the philosophical disciplines of Logics, Physics, and Ethics, we can put an order in our reason, our desires and the proclivity of our behaviours. This allows us to produce an effect on ourselves, which is all the freedom human beings can really aspire to. As Epictetus says in his *Enchiridion* (I, 1-5), which means “something at hand” or “Manual” and was like an instrument gathering the maxims to be used in current everyday life situations and especially in times of trouble (as reading and number base we used the Dinucci & Julien (2012) version, regarding the translation for English we used the Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1865) version):

Of things, some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are opinion (ὕποληψις), movement towards a thing (ὁρμή), desire, aversion (ἔκκλισις), turning from a thing); and in a word, whatever are our own acts: not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices (magisterial power), and in a word, whatever are not our own acts. And the things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint nor hindrance: but the things not in our power are weak, slavish, subject to restraint, in the power of others. Remember then that if you think the things which are by nature slavish to be free, and the things which are in the power of others to be your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will blame both gods and men: but if you think that only which is your own to be your own, and if you think that what is another's, as it really is, belongs to another, no man will ever compel you, no man will hinder you, you will never blame any man, you will accuse no man, you will do nothing involuntarily (against your will), no man will harm you, you will have no enemy, for you will not suffer any harm.

If then you desire (aim at) such great things, remember that you must not (attempt to) lay hold of them with a small effort; but you must leave alone some things entirely, and postpone others for the present. But if you wish for these things also (such great things), and power (office) and wealth, perhaps you will not gain even these very things (power and wealth) because you aim also at those former things (such great things):¹ certainly you will fail in those things through which alone happiness and freedom are secured. Straightway then practice saying to every harsh appearance,² You are an appearance, and in no manner what you appear to be. Then examine it by the rules which you possess, and by this first and chiefly, whether it

relates to the things which are in our power or to things which are not in our power: and if it relates to any thing which is not in our power, be ready to say, that it does not concern you.

It thus becomes clear that if we want to dominate those things that are not under our control is to become their slave and that is why we ought to keep within those realms of our freedom, which require a kind of spiritual exercise. Once again we see that philosophy is not about producing Treatises or trying to impose one's own theoretical perspective about an issue, it is about to undertake a way of life, with the intent of sculpting one's character and perfect oneself. Dialogue shall be understood as a friendly confrontation, as a process between two fighters performing an exercise which benefits them both; like a struggle between oneself –the equivalent of playing chess alone– in order to determine the perspective, change of attitude or conviction, in the form of a dialogue with oneself. In such case, the written word was used only for educational purposes of induction an active spiritual exercise. Exercises because practical, experienced, requiring effort and practice, spiritual because involving the spirit as a whole. The aim is not the doctrine, but a synthetic and coherent constellation of existential principles that can ensure security, serenity, peace, balance, mental harmony, happiness and so the result was not a treaty, but a manual, "at hand"... A Manual one should read, reread, meditate and learn in order to build a lasting matrix for one's own behaviour, because the aim now is to be courageous enough to confront and disclose the truth about oneself (askesis, understood in the broad sense of an exercise or practical training) (Foucault, 1999). That is why teaching philosophical doctrines do not guarantee that the principles are put into practice, does not guarantee the "trans/formation" of the soul and one's way of life, does not serve to penetrate the being. Only the systematic practice of spiritual exercise that articulates reason, imagination and affectivity can root deeply penetrate the being and produce a "second nature" fruit of the margin of freedom to act upon ourselves. The goal of such practice was: self-knowledge, authenticity, freedom, peace. The method: systematic spiritual exercises, combining reason, imagination, and affectivity. Thus creating a de-subjective distancing and endowing one of self-control and guidance for frugality and serenity, the focusing in the present and egalitarianism.

As Pierre Hadot (1995) said, life is complex only approachable by different methods, representing Epicureanism and Stoicism the poles of the inner life: tension and relaxation; commitment and selflessness; enthusiasm and reserves; certainty and scepticism; passion and indifference.

Finally, one may ask, what kind of exercises did Epictetus practice to come to the maxims recollected in his "Manual". Here we will call upon Foucault's "Techniques of parrhesia" (1999). "Parrhesia" can be translated as telling the truth to someone or telling the truth about oneself, which is the for the Stoics and Epictetus as we shall see. According to his analysis of Epictetus' spiritual exercises, they all serve a central purpose: to guarantee the sovereignty of our will and self-stability by putting on constant trial all representation; thus self-sovereignty must be recognized as the organizing principle of Epictetus' form of self-examination. By undertaking such spiritual exercises Epictetus overcomes the problems he met by guaranteeing himself that he could "distinguish those representations that he can control from those that he cannot control, that incite involuntary emotions, feelings, behaviour, etc., and which must therefore be excluded from his mind".

Foucault identifies two types of exercises, although he admits there are numerous types of self-examination techniques and practices in Epictetus. Some of them resembling the evening examinations of Sextius, other similar to the general self-scrutiny of Serenus. In the evening examination practiced by Sextius, as described by Seneca, the examiner asks himself everyday "What bad habit have you cured today?", "What fault have you resisted?", "In what respects are you better?" while following the principle of nothing concealing or omitting from himself, i.e., his consciousness. For Sextius the benefits were obvious and wonderful: anger will cease and become controllable if it finds that it must appear before a judge every day; sleep that follows self-examination becomes delightful, tranquil, deep and untroubled, once the examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character, either praising or admonishing his own soul.

According to Foucault's analysis, Epictetus' spiritual exercises can be explained through two metaphors: "the metaphor of the nightwatchman or doorkeeper who does not admit anyone into his house or palace without first checking his identity; and the metaphor of the 'money-changer' who, when a coin is very difficult to read, verifies the authenticity of the currency, examines it, weighs it, verifies the metal and effigy, and so on". Epictetus want to be sure that through permanent surveillance with regard to all his representations he can guarantee what lies within the moral real, what is within our control.

For the purpose of our work, it is also very important to describe the kind of practices that can be applied. One, borrowed from the Sophists, consists in in game where one partner states a fact and the other has to answer, quickly, whether if it is good or evil by considering if it is within or beyond our control. The second practice develops by a simple way, it just takes one goes walking through the streets asking himself whether any representation that comes to his mind depends on one's will or not. In the former case, it is allowed and considered in the latter it is rejected.

It is time to conclude this issue. Stoicism is a powerful contemplative approach that envisages life as a construction from inside out. It is focused on wide open our eyes to see as if we were seeing for the first time. How much of this philosophical attitude does not need today to be recovered? Especially to confront the invasive “performativity” trend? According to Lyotard (1979), performativity is the culture of performance, where only efficacy and efficiency counts; eventually, it becomes a kind of “culture” that invades all realms of life reducing everything to its regimen of utility, acceleration, measurability, and profitability. However, recently, Mindfulness approaches are gaining increasing scientific attention. What proximities and distances exist between the so-called “Buddhist Trojan Horse” and the ancient human reflexive tradition? That is what still remains to be shown.

MINDFULNESS, SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND EXISTENCE

As stated above, during the whole Antiquity learning to know oneself (*gnóthi seauton*) or to take care of oneself (*cura sui*, in the Latin expression) was a goal of philosophy rooted in a practical approach. However, the moment Modern Science was born, after the sixteenth century, was equally the moment that goal and methods were depreciated and discarded from the map of the paths that lead to knowledge, the paths of scientific research (Antunes, 2014). Nowadays many scholars and researchers from different fields are rehabilitating that ancient tradition which we can claim to be equally oriental and occidental (Bai, Scott, & Donald, 2009), known as mindfulness, meditation or contemplative approaches, although it is presented in contemporary literature as mainly inspired by the Buddhist tradition (Oliveira & Antunes, 2014).

Mindfulness approaches in contemporary scientific knowledge, whereas in the domain of psychology or education, emphasize, rightly, clear thinking, wisdom and the intention of living in the present as attentive, openly, receptive and completely as one can live. This requires a practical approach, training, and a huge commitment to a way of life oriented toward personal and spiritual growth. As Thoreau put it, ‘to waken to a poetic and divine life’ we need to enter the realm of contemplation. Arthur Zajonc, a physics scientist committed to contemplative inquiry, asserts that we need to extend science methods as well as “the same values of clarity, integrity and collegiality can infuse contemplative exploration as have supported natural scientific exploration” (2009, p. 16). The author assumes also that “once we appreciate the full multidimensional nature of the human being and of our universe, we will be better equipped to deal with its problems” (p. 16). Going further he also explains that “we seek through meditation to confront the depths and heights, the moral and spiritual realities that underlie all things” (p.35). Stressing the differences between conventional science (under a positivist orientation), and contemplative inquiry, he states that “where conventional science strives to disengage or distance itself from direct experience for the sake of objectivity, the contemplative inquiry does exactly the opposite. It seeks to engage direct experience, to participate more and more fully in the phenomena of consciousness. It achieves “objectivity” in a different manner, namely through self-knowledge and what Goethe in his scientific writings termed a “delicate empiricism” (p. 35).

Human being know yourself is a call to self-knowledge. Let's consider how a contemporary contemplative scientist describes his experience:

“I hear the call, I pause, and I take up the injunction. I turn first to myself as physical human being. I sense the earthly, substantial aspect of myself: my physical body. I begin with my limbs, my hands and arms, my feet and legs [...] next I turn to the inner life of thoughts, feelings, and intentions. I notice how my will is carried out mysteriously. My intentions to think or to act culminate, via ways that are unknown to me, in a coordinated flow of movement. I live in that activity, which I can direct. It is part of my nature [...]. Finally, I turn to my thinking. My life of thoughts is at once my life and a participant in something that transcends me. I can communicate with others, share thoughts with them. This points to something universal in thinking: like all others, I participate in a universal stream of thinking activity. I know, through experiencing it inwardly, that thinking is a part of my nature. [...] Finally, I shift my attention away from the body and even away from my thoughts, feelings, and intentions. I attend instead to a presence or activity that animates but transcends all of these” (Zajonc, 2009, p. 37).

But, what does mindfulness really mean? Although we saw that mindfulness is not exclusive to eastern knowledge, the concept, as it has been appropriated by contemporary scientific knowledge, is mainly rooted in eastern meditative practices and addresses a specific way of paying attention. According to Kabat-Zinn (1990), its practice requires three key elements: 1) attention focused on the present moment, 2) intentionality and 3) a non-judgemental attitude. This approach is especially used to deal with the tangle of thoughts and feelings on the past or the future, as well as the rationalization which leads individuals to lose sight of what is happening at the present moment and to live in a state termed as “automatic pilot”.

Mindfulness is the English translation of the Pāli word *sati* that means the act of paying attention in the present moment, but this only captures the mechanistic function of *sati*. Considering the total spectrum of meaning, *sati* also means clear comprehension or full awareness (*sati-sampajañña*) that is a psychological stance wherein the object or situation is considered within its context of time, place, and situation. This view incorporates ethical concerns in the sense that includes “an appreciation of the practitioner’s attitudes and the impact that any actions they are involved in will have upon themselves and others” (Amaro, 2015, p. 65). And a third meaning of mindfulness (*sati-paṇṇā*) points to “the quality that leads to the full blossoming of human well-being” (p.65) that is conjoined with wisdom and that involves a process of examination of all experience as it flows. The training in this process culminates in the letting go of absolute realities and in the realization that “what is experienced is not ‘the world’ as a fixed and definite external reality, but rather it is the mind’s representation of the world” (p. 66).

We can add, as Nyanaponika (cit. by Bodhi, 2013) highlighted, that the open, receptive, and non-judgmental attitude inherent in bare attention, is a process of “tidying up the mental household” (p. 29), that requires us to examine the mind. Thus, mindfulness lies not in the conceptual realm but is specifically a pragmatic way of dealing with reality. Buddha took a radically pragmatic approach toward human development and well-being. He started with the experiential domain, the everyday experience of dissatisfaction and suffering and have adopted the attitude of a clinician “*Where does it hurt?*” rather than a theoretical instance, “*Let me tell you how it all works*” (Amaro, 2015, p. 63). This means that concerning mindfulness and the contemplative exploration, the experience of the individual is the defining factor. Such principle, according to Amaro (2015), is clearly articulated in the *Kalama Sutta* where Buddha gave the following orientations:

“Kalamas, do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon a scripture; nor upon deduction; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered; nor upon another’s apparent ability; [...] Kalamas, when you yourself know: ‘These things are unwholesome; these things are blameworthy; these things are criticized by the wise; undertaken and followed, these things lead to harm and dissatisfaction,’ then you would be wise to abandon them...And when you yourselves know: ‘These things are wholesome; these things are not blameworthy; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and followed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,’ you would be wise to enter upon and dwell in them” (A 3.65, cit. by Amaro, 2015, p. 64).

This pragmatic approach helps us to escape, to the extent it is trained, from the trap of using mainly conceptual knowledge and from the tendency, reinforced by the Judeo-Christian tradition of the West, to adopt an instance of judgment everything as right and wrong, good or bad. Judging things as right or wrong comes from a dichotomist and very naïve perspective. In the context of Buddha teachings, the Pāli word *sammā* translated as *right* does not mean right as the opposite of wrong, but rather that which is “balanced”, “attuned”. As Sumedho (2014, cit. by Amaro, 2015, p. 64) put it “one can relate to actions, speech, livelihood and responses to life through wisdom and through being aware of the appropriateness of time and place. This comes through wise intuition, through harmony, through seeing things with a sense of balance and transcendence”.

Thus, mindfulness awareness is cultivated through training, leading us always to a pragmatic standpoint: “Does this attitude, this action, alleviate suffering? Rather than the theoretical question, “Does this experience match the picture of how I believe things to be?” (Amaro, 2015, p. 64).

Lastly, we should emphasize that Mindfulness, spiritual exercises, and existence are profoundly intertwined and that it is a path of practice, development, and (trans)formation and above all of the liberation of human suffering as well as of achieving balance, harmony, and well-being.

CONCLUSION

For concluding, we would like to stress the parallelism found between the philosophical tradition –from Socrates to the late Stoics like Epictetus and Seneca, which has recently gain momentum with Hadot (1995) and Foucault (1999)– and contemporary Mindfulness, which has gain status among psychologists and scholars from other disciplines. As we have tried to show, such parallelism extends from the principles and motives to the purposes, namely self-awareness and a life lived under examination, in order to attain peace of mind, equilibrium, happiness, i.e., spiritual self-development.

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