

Let It Be: Mindfulness and Releasement—Neglected Dimensions of Well-Being

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Western theories of well-being are shaped by individualistic values and assumptions that emphasize control, mastery, and emotional satisfaction. This article explores dimensions of well-being that have been ignored by psychology, in particular, a stance toward experience that emphasizes a deep openness, acceptance, and letting be. Mindfulness and Meister Eckhart's notion of *releasement* (*Gelassenheit*) are used to frame these alternative dimensions that have been central to many non-Western traditions. Releasement is suggested to entail a different kind of experiencing, one that facilitates awareness of our embodiment and of our interdependence, and allows us to dwell in our bodies and be open to being touched by others and nature. Phenomenological, neuroscientific, clinical–developmental, and contemplative perspectives will be integrated to explicate the nature of releasement and how it offers a vision of well-being. Gendlin's (1981) *Focusing* and Gadamer's (1975) *hermeneutic dialogue* will be considered as practical applications of releasement for both our inner and interpersonal life.

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In recent decades, social theorists and critically minded psychologists have advanced numerous pungent and illuminating critiques of how individualism and instrumentalism operate as the conceptual basis and ideology of much of Western psychology and psychotherapy (Cushman, 1995; Gergen & Davis, 1985; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). Although there are notable attempts to articulate alternative theoretical frameworks for psychology, such as hermeneutics (Martin, Sugarman, & Hickinbottom, 2010; Richardson et al., 1999), relational psychoanalysis (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992), dialogical self-theory (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992), and interactivism (Campbell & Bickhard, 1986; Christopher & Bickhard,

2007), it seems clear that even critically minded psychologists are better at discerning problems than developing credible alternatives; in Fromm's (1965) terms, we are better at enunciating the *freedom from* than in clearly formulating a *freedom for*. Some of these critiques, these attempts at *freedom from*, have examined psychological well-being and positive psychology (Becker & Marecek, 2008; Christopher, 1999; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Christopher & Howe, 2014; Richardson & Guignon, 2008; Sugarman, 2007; Woolfolk & Wasserman, 2005). In this article, I attempt to move beyond critique, both my own and others, and humbly offer some reflections on dimensions well-neglected in the mainstream theories on well-being.

Western psychology's historical faith in its objectivity and lack of cultural bias has led to two significant problems: It has both insulated Western theories of well-being from recognizing how deeply they are shaped by individualistic ontological and moral assumptions, and it has contributed to the lack of interest in the views of well-being in indigenous and folk psychologies. I would like to redress this by exploring what mindfulness can contribute to our theories and practices of well-being. But I want

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to approach this orthogonally through what the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart's termed *releasement* (*Gelassenheit*). In part, I begin with Meister Eckhart to broaden the understanding of mindfulness and emphasize its universal qualities and hopefully bring some "freshness" to this exploration.

Releasement entails an openness to being, to letting things be. Letting be requires waiting and listening—attentively receiving what is given to us. It is allowing things to show up and be seen in their own terms before we have imposed our agendas, needs, and desires. Deeply influenced by Eckhart, Martin Heidegger (1966), in his *Discourse on Thinking*, considered releasement as *meditative thinking*. Throughout this article, I use "releasement" interchangeably with "mindfulness" to get at states of mind and body that are essential to well-being.

Specifically, I want to propose that attending to the neglected role of openness and letting be in well-being can potentially foster a different stance toward our body and emotions, one that is deeply embodied. To develop this idea, I weave in notions from phenomenology and hermeneutics, neuroscience, clinical theory, and contemplative practice. Finally, I consider some implications of a stance of openness and letting be to our relationships with both the inner world of sensations, feelings, and thoughts and the outer world of others and nature. I do this by examining two different kinds of practices that capture the spirit of mindfulness and facilitate this kind of openness: Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1975) *hermeneutic dialogue* and Eugene Gendlin's (1981) *focusing*.

What Is Called *Well-Being*?

In the service of advancing a critique of well-being, I've suggested in previous writings that it is useful to think of well-being as a *moral vision* (Christopher, 1999; Christopher & Campbell, 2008; Christopher & Howe, 2014). As the hyphen in the term *well-being* implies, a notion of well-being necessarily presupposes both an ontology of *being*—and an ethos of what is *well* or good. Any understanding of well-being ultimately rests upon an ontology of the self: What is a person? What are her boundaries and what are her faculties? As cultural psychology and psychological anthropology have long documented, there is a considerable range of ways of

being a self or person. On the other side of the hyphen in well-being, exists a space of possibilities where some are marked out as *well*, good, or desirable for human beings to be or become, whereas other ways are marked out as deviant, sinful, or unhealthy, and to be avoided. So, any understanding of well-being, whether in academia or a society's folk psychology, rests on assumptions about a particular kind of self that is located or situated in a particular moral space, what Taylor (1988, 1989) termed a *moral topography*.

Assumptions about what the self *is* and what the self *should be* or *become* are *moral visions*. Moral visions underlie all human activity: our social institutions, our social practices and behavior, even our "inner" world of emotions and cognitions (Christopher, 1996, 2007). Moral visions are necessarily present and inescapable. At times, they can be explicit, consciously articulated and justified. But often, within psychology and the social sciences, moral visions operate implicitly where they inform theory, research, and practice, functioning as what Bernstein (1978) referred to as *disguised ideology*.

There are three dominant approaches to well-being currently in Western psychology: subjective well-being, Ryff's psychological well-being, and positive psychology. Elsewhere, we have examined how each is a manifestation of an individualistic moral vision (Christopher, 1999; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Christopher & Howe, 2014; Marecek & Christopher, 2017). In particular, they draw on a Cartesian view of the self as an "I," what Taylor (2007, p. 28) described as the "thinking subject" and Cushman (1990, p. 599) the "bounded, masterful self." Academic theories of well-being also draw on assumptions about what is "well" or good that are derived from Western cultural values, such as the priority of emotional satisfaction, or emphasizing the importance of meaning, intimacy, and personal growth but leaving the definition or meaning of these up to the individual to determine. Summarizing these critiques leads to three main points about the ways the self can vary that need to be addressed by any adequate theory of well-being.

First, mainstream approaches tend to ignore or minimize the significance of cross-cultural variation in the self, including the kinds of configurations of the self that cross-cultural psychologists lump under *individualism–collectivism*. For instance, although SWB (subjective well-being) has

been studied cross-culturally and found to highly correlate with measures of individualism, Diener and Diener (1995) did not seem to realize that this is because SWB is largely a measure of individualism in the first place (Christopher, 1999). This individualistic self is not universal, indeed when placed in cross-cultural and historical context, it is *WEIRD* (i.e., Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

Second, the self can vary in the degree to which conceptions of it include the body and embodied experience. Mainstream academic approaches to well-being ignore the body. They leave little room for the kind of embodiment that Heidegger (1962) alluded to, but did not fully develop, in framing fundamental agency as *being-in-the-world*. In prioritizing a more cognitive or mentalistic sense of self, the kind of Cartesian “I” that can introspect and then accurately fill in self-report questionnaires, the mainstream approaches seem ill-equipped to address the kinds of embodied experience that may be central to well-being, for instance, experiences of *non-self-centric subjectivity* (Rubin, 1996) or what, as we will discuss later, Eugene Gendlin (1981, 1996) has termed a *felt sense*, a deep experience of sensations in the body and the meanings implicit in them.

Third, in the mainstream approaches to well-being, the possibility for the transformation of the Being (or “self”) is never broached or explored. Yet, from a cross-cultural or historical perspective, one would be hard-pressed to find traditions in which the *transformation* of self or identity is not integral to well-being or the good life. As one example, identity *is* the problem in yoga and much of Indian philosophy. The source of human suffering is regarded as a result of certain kinds of self-interpretations, self-representations, or self-understandings. From this perspective, if we identify with our ego and the sense that we are a distinct self separate from other beings, we suffer and our well-being is significantly compromised.

Oddly, modern mainstream psychology never discusses these possibilities. Even stranger, mainstream psychology *used* to. Most of the seminal Western psychologists including James, Adler, Jung, Erikson, Allport, and Maslow were keenly aware and wrote about the possibility of radical personal transformation. Adler (1979), for instance, in his notion of *so-*

cial interest, maintained that the ability to identify with something larger than the self is central to mental health. These perspectives and insights about self-transformation are either ignored by well-being researchers and theorists or subsumed under the heading of “personal growth” as with Ryff. But a questionnaire item such as “For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth” (Ryff, 1985, p. 91) can hardly capture the kind of radical transformation that is central to so many cultural, religious, and spiritual traditions.

After Maslow (1962), much of the psychological inquiry into peak experiences, meditation, and the transformation of the self has occurred outside of or on the fringes of academia in transpersonal psychology—a field marginalized by mainstream psychology. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) in their opening manifesto for the field of positive psychology did not even deign to mention transpersonal psychology by name. But they disparaged transpersonal psychology in deed by associating the “overly enthusiastic followers” of Maslow and Rogers with the self-help movement, crystal healing, and aromatherapy.

Similarly, the mainstream field of psychological well-being has also ignored the science and practice of mindfulness (which surfaced first in medical literature with Jon Kabat-Zinn’s research on mindfulness-based stress reduction). Ironically, there is now far more empirical support for mindfulness than positive psychology. In addition, mindfulness has clearly caught the public’s interest: People are voting with their feet to learn mindfulness and mindfulness recently graced the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines.

Mainstream theory on well-being, in distancing itself from mindfulness and meditative and contemplative traditions, has avoided the opportunity to question its own presuppositions about the nature of the self and the good life. But neglecting to question the nature of the self perpetuates the self that is the status quo. This is critical to bear in mind, as understandings of the self are not politically neutral. Interpretations of the self are concomitant with socioeconomic-political configurations (Cushman, 1995; Prilleltensky, 1989; Sugarman, 2015). Consequently, theories of well-being both perpetuate and reinforce an individualistic moral vision that is not only culturally and historically spe-

cific but also deeply flawed (Christopher, 1999; Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Christopher, Wendt, Marecek, & Goodman, 2014; Marecek & Christopher, 2017).

In the remainder of this article, I use broad brush strokes to invite a dialogue about neglected dimensions of well-being. I believe these dimensions cannot only help to balance out the individualistic bias of the reigning theories of well-being, but they are less ethnocentric and more in line with non-Western orientations. I begin this rough sketch by explicating releasement and suggesting it provides some insights into an alternative, expanded, and much-needed way of thinking about well-being.

An Alternate View of Well-Being

Before delving into Heidegger's treatment of releasement, I want to discuss *mindfulness*. Originating in the Buddhist and yogic traditions of India, mindfulness has become one of the most popular modalities in psychotherapy, health psychology, and behavioral medicine in America. Mindfulness has been defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness owes its current popularity to Jon Kabat-Zinn, who in the late 1970s developed an 8-week group program, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, at the University of Massachusetts School of Medicine to aid patients dealing with chronic disease and illness. By 2008, mindfulness-based stress reduction had been taught to >17,000 patients at the University of Massachusetts Amherst alone. Mindfulness has been extensively studied: In 2014, >400 clinical trials using mindfulness were either ongoing or completed at the National Institutes of Health and National Institute of Mental Health, and a current PSYCHINFO search indicates 9,425 scholarly articles and chapters related to mindfulness. The principles of mindfulness have since been incorporated into many schools of psychotherapy including dialectical behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, Hakomi, sensorimotor psychotherapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy.

Yet mindfulness is also controversial. Many Buddhist scholars are concerned with how the

Buddhist tradition has been appropriated for secular causes. Careful philological analyses alone indicate that the Pali term for mindfulness, *sati*, was selectively translated to emphasize awareness and attention but omitting reference to mnemonic function of remembering (Bodhi, 2011; Gethin, 2011; Grossman & Van Dam, 2011; Van Dam et al., 2018). Perhaps of most concern has been the avoidance in most Western mindfulness training of *silā*, Buddhist ethics and morality. Not only are the ethical foundations of meditative practice typically not taught in the West, but there are concerns about the indiscriminate use of mindfulness to increase instrumental performance and enhance the self. This has led to debates, for instance, about the appropriateness of teaching mindfulness to snipers in the military to increase effectiveness or as a prophylactic against posttraumatic stress disorder or teaching mindfulness to promote "mental toughness" for business entrepreneurs. Moreover, in some applications of mindfulness, like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, meditation is considered optional; it is taught more as a worldview than as a daily meditative discipline that gradually leads to existential insight. As a result, many fear that mindfulness is being co-opted to reinforce Western individualism and instrumentalism instead of fostering awareness of the impermanence of the self (Christopher, Oswal, & Deokar, 2013; Goleman & Davidson, 2017). To bypass these issues and invite a fresh rethinking of the self and well-being, I will focus on the notion of releasement throughout this article while recognizing that the overlap with mindfulness is substantial.

Toward the end of his life, Heidegger (1966), in the *Discourse on Thinking*, described release-ment as *meditative thinking* in contrast to *calculative thinking*. Heidegger believed that what he saw as real, genuine, or authentic thinking, entailed an openness to the world that allows it to appear to us in its own terms. He contrasted this kind of thinking with what he termed *calculative thinking*—a more strategic and instrumental form of thought that entails forming calculations within preestablished parameters. One impact of technology on human beings, Heidegger believed, is that it encourages excessive reliance on calculative thinking. His fear was that "the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate,

bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced *as the only* way of thinking” (p. 56). Although Heidegger saw that calculative thinking had its uses, he believed it is ultimately a type of “thoughtlessness,” as it remains within the “conditions that are given” and fails to contemplate “the meaning which reigns in everything that is” (p. 46).

Fortunately, Heidegger (1966) believed we also have the capacity for *meditative thinking*. “The proper exercise of this capacity,” he wrote, “difficult though it is in terms of releasement toward things and openness to mystery, can lead to a new ground of meaning” (p. 21). There is an obvious mystical or mindful element to this thought, and it is not a coincidence that Heidegger was not only grounded in Meister Eckhart’s Christian mysticism but also flirted with Taoism and Zen Buddhism through much of his career and was working on a German translation of the *Tao Te Ching* at one point (May & Parkes, 1996; Parkes, 1987). It is especially easy to see the parallels with the central Taoist notion of *wu wei* or nonpurposive action. For Taoists, as religious scholar Harold Roth (1991, 1999) noted,

the things of this world have inherent and sacred natures and patterns that are not ultimately able to be controlled by willful human action. Best to stand back and let things follow these natures and patterns and then act when the moment is right. (Roth, personal communication, June 17, 2017)

In this way, as chapter 29 of the *Tao Te Ching* concludes, “. . . Sages avoid excessive egotism, extravagance, and arrogance” (Roth, personal translation, June 17, 2017). This notion of releasement has many precursors in Heidegger’s earlier thought. We might, for instance, consider it underpinning his definition of phenomenology as “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 58).

The “Being” in Well-Being

Heidegger’s discussions of releasement in his later writings are part of a lifelong project of dethroning the Cartesian “I.” Throughout Heidegger’s work is the attempt to overcome what Caputo (1986) called the *subject-ism* that dominates Western thought since at least Descartes. By subject-ism, Caputo meant “setting up the thinking subject as the highest principle

of Being, and subordinating everything to the dictates and demands of the subject” (p. 175).

It is against this backdrop that Heidegger emphasized that authentic thinking is not “grasping” or a will to dominate. Thinking, as the existential analyst and student of Heidegger, Medard Boss (1965), put it, is “not a conceptual taking possession of, a getting-hold-of, a will-to-have the truth, but a letting-oneself-be-filled-with it, a hearkening to it, a merging in it—this is the way to know the truth . . .” (p. 121). In this way, Heidegger saw thinking as involving gratitude and reverence. It’s a kind of *thinking* (Heidegger, 1968). And when we can adopt this sort of stance, then we notice, according to Heidegger, that “The call of Being is the call to experience the wonder of all wonders, that the being is” (cited in Caputo, 1986, p. 26). For,

Being is nothing that answers to human questions, nothing that submits to human interpretation; it is in no way subordinate to human demands. The only way to gain access to Being itself is to let Being be and to let it address man. (cited in Caputo, 1986, p. 25).

Thus, what Heidegger was calling for is a stance of presence. Indeed, in his historical ontological analyses, Heidegger discerned “that ‘Being’ is originally called ‘presencing,’ and ‘presencing’ means: to come to and endure in unconcealedness” (cited in May & Parkes, 1996, p. 23). Thus, for Heidegger, “the only ‘power’ of Dasein lay in surrendering its will and letting Being be” (cited in Caputo, 1986, p. 26).

“When concern holds back from any kind of producing, manipulating, and the like, it puts itself into what is now the sole remaining mode of Being-in, the mode of just tarrying alongside . . .” (Caputo, 1986, p. 86). In his *Discourse on Thinking*, Heidegger compared this way of being, tarrying alongside, with walking through the Black Forest on logging roads—winding and circuitous routes that have no particular destination or purpose other than to create access to the forests. Caputo (1986) continued that,

This kind of Being toward the world is one which lets us encounter entities within-the-world purely in the way they look, just that; *on the basis of this kind of Being, and as a mode of it, looking explicitly at what we encounter is possible.* (p. 86)

Releasement as meditative thinking then becomes a means for cultivating the “Openness to Being” that preoccupied Heidegger throughout his life.

This kind of thinking is a discipline. Heidegger described it in ascetic terms: *persistence, insistence, readiness for anxiety, ability to endure disconsolation, and facing the dark night of the soul*. It requires higher effort and more practice and more delicate care than calculative reason. As Heidegger (1966) put it, “Yet releasement toward things and openness to the mystery never happen of themselves. They do not befall us accidentally. Both flourish only through persistent, courageous thinking” (p. 56). When we compare this statement to our normal understanding of thinking as the kind of instrumental rationality that Heidegger termed *calculative thinking*, it becomes clear that what he was calling for is groundbreaking.

Yet, I sense the notion of releasement has far richer and more radical implications that Heidegger left undeveloped. Releasement is more than a way of thinking, it implies a certain kind of “subject” or being that is able to enter into or dwell in releasement. To experience releasement requires us to transcend or bypass the sense of agency that is equated with a thinking subject, or a bounded masterful self. I would suggest that releasement refers more to the *ground* of thinking than it does to a particular style of thinking. We might think of releasement itself as a stance of openness, presence, and letting be, more than just a mode of thinking. This stance, in turn, shapes our experience and how we think.

Heidegger treated releasement as meditative thinking that can be extended to others and nature. But if we instead see releasement as stance of openness and letting be, then it makes sense that this is a stance we can also adopt toward ourselves, and toward experience itself as it moves through us. What might it mean to practice releasement toward ourselves? At one level, it invites what in yoga is termed *sakshibhava*, the ability to nonreactively observe and witness our experience. Doing this can change our relationship to our thoughts and the thinking part of us. In short, we begin to disidentify from the thinking part and to see it as one part of the flow of experience, alongside emotions and sensations. This lies at the heart of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. As we become better at being open to our thoughts and mental life, we can also begin to notice our internal complexity—“the self does not need to be consistent and coherent but is instead constituted by values and goals that exist at dif-

ferent levels of awareness in different states of harmony and conflict” (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007, p. 287).

But perhaps even more profoundly, release-ment toward ourselves invites us to notice the sensations in our bodies and to learn to dwell in them. I would like to claim that cultivating awareness of somatic experience or *interoception* and learning to tolerate and perhaps embrace the ebbs and flows of sensations lie at the core of well-being.

Phenomenologically, our sense of self or agency originates with embodied gestures, movements, and internal experience as David Michael Levin argued for in the *Body's Recollection of Being*. For as Levin (1985) noted, “our first understanding of Being, and of ourselves in relation to Being, the primordial understanding we already enjoy as a child, is given to us and belongs to us by way of our embodiment” (p. 8).

Levin pointed out this kind of embodiment is intimately intertwined with emotional experience. Our embodiment presupposes emotional responsiveness to ourselves in the environment. Levin (1985) wrote “Every feeling is an embodiment attuned in this or that way, a mood that embodies in this or that way” (p. 50). One important implication of this is that working with our body and somatic experience is at the same time working with our emotional life. Releasement then toward our body, our somatic experience, is a way of being present and open to the ground of our being. And this facilitates comfort in our own skin, emotional sensitivity and literacy, and autonomic and emotional regulation. Because of this, Levin made a provocative appeal to move beyond dualism:

We must let go, finally, of our metaphysical conception of “thinking.” We must simply *give* our thought *to* the body. We must take our thinking “down” into the body. We must learn to think *through* the body. We must learn to think *with* the body. (p. 61)

Levin urged us to recognize that the body is not simply a vehicle for transporting our consciousness around. Instead, the ground of thinking is the body.

Thinking is not a question of “bracketing” the body in Husserl’s Epoché), but a question of integrating awareness, living well—focused “in the body.” For once, we should *listen in silence* to our bodily felt experience. Thinking needs to learn by feeling, by *just being* with our bodily being. (p. 61)

Levin's conclusion that self originates in the body and his appeal for a different way of thinking about thinking that includes the body are themes also found in Winnicott's version of object relations theory.

Embodiment and the Origins of the Self in Winnicott's Object Relations Theory

Pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott provided nuanced insight into the developmental origins of the self and how we can become disembodied and lose our ability to think through the body. We might think of Winnicott as laying out the kinds of formative conditions that facilitate or preclude the possibility of openness and letting be. And in his related notion of *unintegration*, he helped flesh out a more embodied, emotionally interconnected, and dualistically unfractured view of the self than is often found in Western clinical-developmental theories.

Winnicott (1965) claimed that when parenting is not "good enough," a child will become alienated from the very rudiments of herself. Good enough parenting requires avoiding the Charybdis of too much intrusiveness, what he called *impingements*, or the Scylla of too much abandonment by the parents. The process of becoming a person, a self, requires being able to slowly observe and then integrate the smallest bits and pieces of our experience, reactions, and needs. Here, Winnicott is in agreement with Freud's claim that "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego" (Freud, 1923/1960, p. 20).

We learn about hunger, for instance, by initially experiencing physiological arousal, then discomfort and distress (sympathetic nervous system [SNS] activation), and then hopefully the attuned responsiveness of caretakers providing nourishment, and then satiation (parasympathetic nervous system [PNS] activation). However, to remain internally connected to, or to experience the natural and unimpeded trajectory of these somatic processes, requires conditions of safety and security, what Bowlby (1988) would later reference as a *secure base*. Without this, the infant has to focus too much on the parents or the external environment instead of tracking her own reactions. And too much external focus, Winnicott (1965) maintained, leads to a premature "development of the ego-function" (p. 62). The infant learns that when external stimuli are too intense or too threatening,

it is unsafe to continue dwelling in the body. Instead the infant needs to anticipate what might happen, and to do so draws on cognitive functions. This results phenomenologically in an over activity of mind and a disconnection from the body. When these kinds of unsafe experiences occur too frequently, Winnicott concluded, this precocious cognitive orientation become separated from any affective or somatic grounding and leads to rupture of the mind-body. Such infants, Winnicott suggested, start life by *reacting* and not by *existing*, by being literally too much in their heads. It is this disconnection from the experience of the body that is the origin of the *false self*. These disembodied ways of being can reach extremes where some people are not able to notice their bodies' basic biological needs like hunger. Such self-alienation and dissociation can obviously have long-term consequences for forming a healthy sense of self.

If we are not compelled to prematurely develop a false self, we can dwell in a state of *unintegration*. Winnicott viewed unintegration as a positive state facilitated by a sense of security and trust, that is, without a premature or compulsive need to force coherence upon either internal or external events. This leads to deep states of relaxation. As Winnicott (1965) elaborated, "Relaxation for an infant means not feeling a need to integrate, the mother's ego-supportive function being taken for granted" (p. 61). Unintegration involves the ability to play and enter into transitional experience where we remain deeply connected to "the most private wellspring of our thoughts and imagery." "It is here," he added, that,

we can let our thoughts wander, concerned neither with their logic and validity in the real world nor with the threat that our musings will lead us into a totally subjective, solipsistic realm, causing us to lose the real world altogether. (p. 61)

The healthy person, from Winnicott's perspective, never loses the connection to her body and emotions. In a sense, she never loses the kind of openness and letting be to her own experience that we have been exploring.

Openness and Embodiment in Buddhist Psychology

Many of these insights and themes, including the priority of the body and the importance of noticing and working with embodied physical

sensation, have long been recognized in different schools of Buddhist psychology. Consider the following from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as captured by the religious scholar and meditation teacher Reggie Ray (2008):

The more we shut out our body, the more we retreat into thinking. The intensity of our compulsive thinking is in direct proportion to the extent that we are unwilling to experience our body in a full and direct way. We have, in fact, dissociated from it. (p. 81)

Here, we see that Ray basically made the same point as Winnicott: When we learn it is unsafe to have our actual experience, we “retreat into thinking” and rely on an overly cognitive orientation to life that ultimately leads us to become alienated from experience itself and causes us to suffer.

Within the Theravadan tradition of Vipassana, “observations of sensations offers a means—indeed the only means—to examine the totality of our being, physical as well as mental” (Goenka, 1996, p. viii). The process and contents of the mind, from this perspective, always manifest themselves in bodily sensations. As the Buddha put it in the Mūlaka Sutta, “Everything that arises in the mind flows together with sensations.” Meditation teachers such as Goenka use this insight to help eradicate suffering. Goenka’s method entails continuous and progressive scanning of the body—and then holding the sensations we encounter with equanimity. In doing this, we are not just opening to the body and learning to tolerate physical sensations. But because physical sensations in the body are simultaneously primary emotions, as Siegel (2012) pointed out, we are also in Vipassana’s somatically based meditations experientially opening to primary emotion and learning acceptance and emotional regulation. Most of us tend to be either emotionally over- or undercontrolled. Encountering emotion in its most basic form gives us the chance to form a new relationship with our emotional life and to find emotional equilibrium.

Working with the body is also foundational in the Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana tradition. Through extensive meditation practice, followers of this tradition discover that,

When experience initially appears, there is something there, but this first arises in the body as somatic knowledge that has not yet been “processed” by the thinking mind; it has not yet been “recognized” as one thing as opposed to another, and it does not have a label or story attached to it. (Ray, 2008, pp. 141–142)

However, for most of us we recoil from this uncertainly; our anxiety leads us to attempt to identify what is happening or what something is, fitting it into our conceptual world. And, at this moment, “The important point is that we have literally created the bounded and definable ‘thingness’ that we eventually arrived at out of the seemingly limitless totality of what our body initially received” (p. 143). In this way, we construct our worlds. However, there is a cost.

In our search for the comfort and security of a definable and locatable identity, we attempt to maintain this self-concept in the face of our experience. To do this, as we have seen, we have to continually negate our actual experience. (p. 154)

Again, Ray, through the phenomenology of contemplative practice, arrived at the same conclusions as Winnicott about the false self.

Through “body work,” Tibetan yoga and other meditative practices centered in the body can cultivate a stance similar to what Eckhart and Heidegger termed *releasement*. But in these meditative traditions, the priority is experiencing rather than thinking. And the stance of openness and letting be in these traditions becomes turned not just toward the world, but to our very self, as Ray (2008) made clear:

Again, when we abandon the idea that what we “really” are is a centralized self corresponding to our ideas, we discover ourselves as the unceasing, ever-changing Kaleidoscope of experience that arises as our life. So we discover that we are, in each moment, a truly individual phenomenon, not limited even (or especially) by any notion of a continuous or coherent “self.” (p. 153)

In this way, these kinds of meditative practices, like *releasement*, offer an antidote to the false self. In place of a thinking subject, they foster a sensing or experiencing subject, and instead of “imposing coherence” upon the self, they invite recognizing the complexity and multiplicity of the self.

Openness, Neuroscience, and Health

The phenomenological, clinical–developmental, and contemplative perspectives that we have considered thus far seem to be receiving scientific corroboration from the fields of stress physiology, affective neuroscience, and the neurobiology of attachment. Neuro-physiological research supports the long-standing observation from phenomenological and contemplative traditions that our core internal states exist on a continuum between open and closed, re-

laxed and tense. In the 5th–4th centuries B.C. E., Patanjali discussed the role of open and tense states in health in his classic text the *Yoga Sutras*. Openness or *suksha* has its roots in the ability to remain comfortable in a posture during asana practice. Optimally, *suksha* should be generalized from asana practice to a way of being in life characterized by learning to find ease in the midst of life's challenges and stress (Desikachar, 1995). The opposite, *dukkha*, points to a sense of restriction, again initially found in yoga poses, and is ultimately a result of Avidya, “incorrect comprehension” or ignorance. In short, we tense up and resist or grasp because we forget that Atman = Brahman, that the individual soul or self is of the same stuff as the Absolute or Godhead. Forgetting this, we attempt to protect ourselves or impose our will upon life and become ensnared by selfishness, desire, hatred, and fear.

These open and close states, *suksha* and *dukkha*, seem to correspond to the parasympathetic and sympathetic states of the autonomic nervous system. The openness of releasement might be linked to PNS states. PNS states (“rest and digest”) are dependent on feeling safe and secure. As Winnicott observed, if we feel safe and secure, then we can afford to remain in contact with our body. We can afford to be interoceptively attuned, which enables emotional awareness and regulation (Siegel, 2012). On an interpersonal level, when safe and secure, we can afford to emotionally resonate with others, and we can be touched by others—the precursors of empathy and compassion.

On the other hand, without safety and security, and particularly in the face of trauma, we spend too much time in sympathetic arousal, or flight–fight, potentially leading to autonomic dysregulation. Phenomenologically, autonomic dysregulation is a state organized around hypervigilance toward threats (whether external or internal) resulting in contraction on both somatic and psychological levels. Without safety, we learn to dissociate from the body, and our sense of identity contracts.

The neuroendocrinologist Robert Sapolsky (2004) marshaled extensive research that the overwhelming source of most illness and disease in contemporary society is overactivation of the SNS. When in SNS activation, all of the body's resources are mobilized for fighting or fleeing and all nonessential systems, including

the immune, reproductive, and human growth systems, are turned off to conserve energy. “A large body of evidence suggests,” according to Sapolsky (2004),

that stress-related disease emerges, predominantly, out of the fact that we so often activate a physiological system that has evolved for responding to acute physical emergencies, but we turn it on for months on end, worrying about mortgages, relationships, and promotions. (p. 7)

The vulnerability, vigilance, and contraction associated with SNS overactivation also helps to make sense of findings, as with the now classic Adverse Childhood Experience study (Felitti et al., 1998), that trauma significantly negatively impacts physical and mental health. The lack of safety and subsequent need to be vigilant may also explain research findings in the social disparities in health, as seen with the Whitehall studies (Marmot et al., 1991), that the most important determinant of individual health is one's position in the socioeconomic hierarchy, and how much disparity there is in that hierarchy between the haves and have nots (generalized inequality index). The common factor seems to be whether we feel vulnerable and need to be vigilant, or whether we feel safe and secure and can remain open, underscoring the long-noticed necessity for conditions of safety and security in human development and health (Bowlby, 1988; Erikson, 1963; Maslow, 1962).

Summary

I would like to conclude by suggesting that Heidegger's notion of releasement suggests a larger moral vision—a moral vision with implications for well-being. As Levin (1985) noted,

when *Being and Time* takes up the ancient metaphysical “Question of Being,” we are to understand this questioning in light of its significance for our sanity and our health. The “Question of Being” holds the secret, the medicine, of our well-being, in the sense that the *Dasein's* wholeness, its own becoming-a-Self, is *dependent* upon its capacity to experience itself in relation to *Being as a whole*. (p. 6)

Releasement is this capacity to experience ourselves in relation to Being as a whole. Such a self is one that is embodied, emotionally present, and has permeable boundaries with Others and the external world.

The different perspectives that I have tried to integrate—phenomenological, developmental,

contemplative, and neuroscientific—all directly or implicitly challenge the kind of bounded and masterful self whose essence is a Cartesian thinking subject, the self that has been central to Western culture and Western notions of well-being. The nondualistic approaches of Winnicott and Heidegger point out how the Cartesian thinking subject is predicated on a phenomenological rupture of the body/mind. For Winnicott, the kind of self that is primarily and rigidly identified as a thinking subject may at times be the result of defensive and compensatory strategies generated through relational or historical trauma. This raises deep questions about what it means that such a potentially limited way of being, the Cartesian *I*, has played such a decisive role in Western cultural history and in notions of well-being.

Although the body has been completely disregarded in existing Western academic approaches to well-being, the traditions we have been considering all concur that the Being in well-being needs to be grounded in the body. The insights of Winnicott and Freud that the self begins in somatic/affective experience are now supported by theorists in neuropsychology, affective science, and child development (Damasio, 2010; Schore, 1994; Siegel, 2012). In addition, there is a strong emphasis in these various perspectives that the “well” entails an Openness of the *Being*, a kind of *porous self* to use Taylor’s (2007) phrase. Although hatha yoga grounds this kind of openness in the body, it is of kin to the outlook of “inshalla” in Islam, “may thy will be done” of the Lord’s Prayer, or *wu wei* (nonpurposive action) in Taoism, suggesting that the appeal of releasement as a stance of openness and letting be, transcends culture and history.

Practical Applications

Before concluding, I would like to consider two practical applications of releasement, or mindfulness: Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1975) *hermeneutic dialogue* and Eugene Gendlin’s (1981) *Focusing*.

Hermeneutic Dialogue and Presence

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutic dialogue represents to me a compelling example of applying releasement. There are striking similarities between releasement and the

kind of openness that is central to Gadamer’s account of hermeneutic dialogue. Yet, despite being a student of Heidegger, Gadamer, to the best of my knowledge, never used the term *releasement* or references this aspect of Heidegger’s thought.

Gadamer (1975) began with the claim that relying on “method,” even hermeneutic method, is inadequate to pursue the aims of the human sciences. Instead he focused on explicating the process of coming to understanding and “what is common to all modes of understanding” (p. xxxi). Understanding, as Taylor (2002) summarized, “has to be construed, not on the model of the ‘scientific’ grasp of an object, but rather on the model of speech-partners coming to an understanding” (p. 126). This is true whether we are trying to understand a text or an event in both everyday life or in the human sciences. Gadamer (1975) termed this process of coming to an understanding as *hermeneutic dialogue*: a sort of back and forth mediation of meaning. As Gadamer explored in the fields of aesthetics, historiography, and language, hermeneutic dialogue is an ongoing, living, interactive process in which meaning and understanding get worked out. This working out of meaning occurs whether we are working with a text, such as trying to understand the intent of the framers of the Bill of Rights, or whether we are trying to understand someone from a different cultural background.

Gadamer (1975) detailed two phases of dialogue. First, understanding requires a deep “openness” that goes well beyond the simple effort to understand the other and requires the development of a common understanding and a shared language of the situation under consideration or “fusion of horizons.” Gadamer described this as an “anticipation of truth” that means that we take the other’s perspective seriously, as having potentially valid and important things to say to us. Openness goes far beyond respectful tolerance by granting the other perspective provisional authority to challenge our own views. As Richardson et al. (1999) summarized,

... I start from the assumption that what the other has to say might be true, and I therefore adopt a stance of respectful openness to what she says: I constantly strive to make her arguments stronger, and I risk my own assumptions by letting them be challenged by her. (p. 234)

“In human relations,” Gadamer stressed, “the important thing is . . . to experience the ‘Thou’ truly as a ‘Thou’, i.e., not overlook his claim and to listen to what he has to say” (p. 324).

But Gadamer observed that this kind of openness does not imply that we indiscriminately accept and adopt the views or practices of others into our way of life. We invariably draw on a second phase of dialogue, *application*, to test, through critical reflection, whether the knowledge that we gain through dialogue with the Other really does lead to a better understanding of the situation. We always test, apply, and modify what we gain through openness to the Other according to our own concrete situation and in our own historical context.

This process, according to Taylor (2002), involves an exquisite, quintessentially human, sometimes almost unbearable tension. As Richardson, Bishop, and Garcia-Joslin (2018) summarized,

On the one hand, we harbor self-defining beliefs and values concerning things we truly care about, in which we have a “deep identity investment,” sometimes an investment in “distorted images we cherish of others” (Taylor, 2002, p. 141). On the other hand, since our ideals and our images of others and events are always partial or distorted in some way, we need to not just compromise and get along with others, but to learn from the past, others, or other cultures. In doing so, we sometimes incur a deeply personal, sometimes painful “identity cost” (Taylor, 2002, p. 141). (p. 22)

Gadamer did not provide detail about the psychological abilities and skills that are prerequisite to the openness necessary for genuine dialogue. But clearly such openness requires psychological awareness and vulnerability. Social psychologists have found that individuals vary in the extent to which they open themselves to and experience awareness of others’ true emotions, as opposed to projecting their own emotions onto others, or relying on preconceptions (Barone et al., 2005; Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000; Mascaro, Rilling, Negi, & Raison, 2013). Individuals also vary in the extent to which they are aware of how their previous experiences and “gut-level” reactions shape their behavior toward others (Gawronski, Hofmann, & Wilbur, 2006; Hahn, Judd, Hirsh, & Blair, 2014).

The openness necessary for genuine dialogue rests upon the ability to partially suspend, bracket, or witness our assumptions, values, ex-

pectations, and desires. To maintain the openness of dialogue, we are required to dwell, at least temporarily, in ambiguity and uncertainty. Consequently, working with difference, working with the Other is a challenge to our whole being. As such, it can be tremendously anxiety provoking, leading us to become defensive by shutting down, withdrawing, or attempting to control or dominate the other. True hermeneutic dialogue then is not just an intellectual or cognitive openness. It also requires awareness of somatic-affective states and how to remain open when we feel threatened. Indeed, I believe that releasement is a psycho-physiological stance of openness that is prerequisite to hermeneutic dialogue.

We can develop some degree of control over whether we are Open or become defensive, resistant, and contracted by practicing mindfulness and cultivating releasement. Mindfulness practices, such as meditation, contemplative prayer, yoga, qigong, and tai chi, can serve as preparation for hermeneutic dialogue by cultivating awareness and a stance of releasement. We can also think of hermeneutic dialogue as an application of mindfulness or releasement (Christopher, 2007). Genuine openness to a text or the Other is releasement or mindfulness in action. Conversely, meditation might be thought of as a kind of hermeneutic dialogue, in this case with ourselves, as we open to our own experience, letting it challenge our prejudgments and sense of identity.

Focusing

Within psychology, arguably one of the earliest and most radical uses of something that closely resembles releasement occurs with Eugene Gendlin’s *Focusing* and his latest offering *Thinking at the Edge*. Gendlin’s (1981, 1996, 2004) approach, developed in his collaboration with Carl Rogers in the 1960s, invited us to notice what is happening somatically in the core of our body. Instead of rushing to label what we are experiencing, as say anger, and then analyze our experience (“Where did this anger come from? Is it an appropriate response? What should I do about it?” and so on), Gendlin encouraged us to simply notice and explore the sensations occurring in our body, our *felt sense*. Gendlin (1996) defined a felt sense as “the wholistic, implicit bodily sense of a complex situation” (p. 58). Giving space to

this felt sense, or what he described as “the body as sensed *from inside*,” we are encouraged to wait, to adopt a stance of following (Gendlin, 1996, p. 2). This is similar to what Levin (1985) earlier in the article appealed to as “thinking through the body.”

Through focusing, we can learn to first notice the richness of our internal sensations rather than hastening to interpret and label them. And frequently, when we do wait, the felt sense begins to unfold. This can take the form of additional aspects emerging from the original sensation or the felt sense can morph into new sensations in the body (e.g., what was a burning in the diaphragm area becomes a throbbing in the throat). With time, images, memories, or phrases emerge that capture the meaning of our experience in often fresh and unexpected ways.

Gendlin’s methods are designed to create the psychological conditions for the implicit meanings that are present in our lives to become explicit. He offered a means for learning to have a dialogical relationship with ourselves, especially those parts of us that are implicit. In both focusing and thinking at the edge, Gendlin’s method can be thought of as teaching release-ment to ourselves. It is a process of becoming open to our own experience and then letting it be. By making the implicit explicit, focusing fosters self-knowledge. But focusing might also be considered a process of reorienting our psychological center of gravity from our head, our intellect, the thinking subject, or cogito of Descartes, to our body. Priority is given to the felt sense.

I have found that learning to work with our felt sense can also be a way of promoting affect or emotion regulation. Focusing fosters the capacity to observe and witness, while still remaining connected to our experience. From this stance of witnessing and observing, what is known in yoga as *sakshibhava*, we can come to have a nonreactive relationship to our experiences. This helps us to tolerate difficult emotions—thereby developing that all too elusive middle ground between denial and acting out (Epstein, 1998). Focusing in this way exemplifies the stance of openness and letting be that defines release-ment and literally can open up inner worlds of richness, creativity, and complexity.

Conclusion

Release-ment and mindfulness entail a kind of *spiritual surrender* where we allow experience to move through us, trusting its meaningfulness and ultimate goodness, or at least necessity. In a sense, we come to allow experience to use our body as a canvas to express itself and in the process opening to the emotional tones and reverberations of our somatic experience. Release-ment can also be thought of as involving a kind of suspension or even death of the ego in much the same way Freud thought of an orgasm as the little death. In this state, we can learn to disidentify with the tension, the efforting, the bracing, the grasping, and the fear. Release-ment entails letting go of agendas, control, and insecurity, and giving ourselves the space to dwell in our body. At the same time, being present to our embodied experience is also an openness to our most basic emotionality. Learning to non-reactively witness is a deep means of bottom-up regulation of our emotions.

In this article, I have tried to broaden the notion of being that underlies our theories of well-being. Central to this attempted broadening is a different conception of the self that accompanies the type of thinking Heidegger referred to as release-ment and is the aim of all authentic mindfulness practices. In trying to unpack this idea and examine its implications for well-being, the poverty of mainstream theories of well-being becomes apparent. These mainstream theories are virtually silent when it comes to considering the ways well-being might most centrally entail transformation of our identity and very personhood and learning to dwell in our bodies.

At a minimum any adequate theory of well-being needs a robust and comprehensive view of the self, the “being” in well-being. An adequate theory needs to be able to account for cross-cultural and historical variations, rather than imposing one historically constituted and “peculiar” notion of selfhood, as Geertz (1973) noted, namely, individualism. And a theory of well-being needs to account for and illuminate our relationship to our body, and our experience of embodiment. Rather than presupposing one particular notion of selfhood, an adequate theory of well-being needs to be able explore what role different configurations of the self play in well-being. In other words, an adequate theory

of well-being should have something to say about what types of selves and what types of internal states might be healthier or more *well*, at least from particular perspectives.

An adequate theory of well-being should also be able to offer a compelling view of the “well.” In what direction do we find our wellness, health, and integrity? What stance should we adopt toward different aspects of our experience? Releasement and mindfulness provide one alternative to the emphasis upon control, mastery, and emotional satisfaction that is so prevalent in Western psychology. There are many other alternatives. Psychology has thus far largely ignored the diversity of ways of being *well* that exist in the world and through history. Given the enormous contribution that mindfulness has made to medicine and psychotherapy in just the past 10 years, I think it is incumbent to discover what other undiscovered jewels exist in human culture. I suspect one of the next big “discoveries” by Western psychology will be the Chinese tradition of qigong.

On a personal level, I initially learned about releasement through hatha yoga—a practice of assuming awkward and challenging postures and then learning how to let go of unnecessary efforting (*dukkha*), becoming aware of and then relaxing those muscles that are not needed to maintain the pose. Learning to relax muscles is at the same time regulating the internal affective–somatic states that underlie unnecessary tension. I also learned about openness and letting be through participating in Native American ceremonies and working with shamans in different parts of the world. In the sweat lodge, for instance, only by relaxing or transcending the ego can the heat, the darkness, and the cramped position be endured—you have to surrender to survive. This relaxing/transcending is deeply humbling, indeed temporarily ego dissolving, and helps make sense of why the sweat lodge is considered a rebirthing experience. Other Native American ceremonies like the 4-day sundance and vision quest ceremonies take this stance of surrender to superhuman heights.

My experience from a 35-year daily yoga and meditation practice lead me to side with Foucault and Hadot: To profess well-being, like the ancients, we have to practice self-care (Foucault, 2005; Hadot & Davidson, 1995). Yet practicing self-care is no simple task, especially

if it entails something like releasement. But the importance of this task cannot be understated. Perhaps, ultimately, “the issue,” as Heidegger (1966) put it, is “the saving of man’s essential nature” (p. 56).

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