The Bipolar Buddhist

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I am a Buddhist. I first became interested in Buddhism as a teenager, while in confirmation class for the United Church of Christ. We spent some time exploring other branches of Christianity, attending a Greek Orthodox mass and meeting with a Catholic priest, which made me curious about entire other religions. Buddhism appealed to be immediately, because it just made *so much sense*. The first three noble truths seemed so true to me, and the fourth, the Noble Eightfold Path, seemed like a logical way to live in such a way to bring about the end of stress and suffering. I began meditating right away, according to instructions I found in some book somewhere (because a Christian teenager finding a Buddhist teacher in central Indiana in the 1980s was not something that was going to happen), but it wasn't until 2011 that I began practicing with a group, taking refuge formally in 2012.

Around the time I discovered Buddhism, my bipolar disorder began manifesting. I was also curious about abnormal psychology, so I had some idea of what was happening to me based on the textbooks I had read. Over the years, my disorder worsened. I had developed a mistrust of Big Pharma and the Western Medical Establishment common to young anticapitalist hippies who think the only medicine they need is cannabis and mushrooms, so I sought to control my symptoms through meditation and herbs. Eventually, that transitioned to self-medication by imperial stouts and Kentucky bourbons, until I reached a breaking point and decided to seek help from the Establishment I so feared. I was desperate to make it end, and finally willing to gobble down a pill that I was sure would turn me into a zombie if it would just make the torment go away. I was diagnosed bipolar in 2010 and put on lamotrigine. Thereafter, my episodes became muted and manageable, and I did not turn into a mindless consumerist zombie drone like I feared. I was able to live relatively free of my illness. Every few years a medication adjustment is necessary, but otherwise I am living a much better life now.

But that's not to say my Buddhist practice had no value to dealing with my bipolar disorder. Indeed, I credit my being alive today to my ability to simply stay still and wait, practicing mindfulness, letting the suicidal thoughts and plans go as quickly as they arose. And even with medication I still occasionally have episodes, so the practice still comes in handy. Conversely, I believe being bipolar has helped my Dharma practice. So I thought I'd write up a few thoughts on being both bipolar and Buddhist, in the hopes that they might help someone going through similar struggles. Of course, everyone's bipolar is different, but so is everyone's practice. This is just my experience.

Being Buddhist Helps with Being Bipolar

The benefit of mindfulness practice for treating certain mental illnesses has a growing body of clinical evidence. A generic sort of mindfulness practice can be taught at hospitals and in counselor's offices that, while contraindicated for something like CPTSD, is practically indispensable for mood disorders and certain personality disorders (especially if combined with cognitive-behavioral therapy).

This clinical mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism. Jon Kabat-Zinn trained in Zen, Thiền, and Vipassanā, and from that developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. So, naturally, we might look to Buddhism to see if there's anything else there of value.

Mindfulness is just one part of Buddhism, one factor of the eight factors of the eightfold path. And, indeed, for it to be considered correctly done by a Buddhist, it must occur along with the other seven factors. Mindfulness no doubt plays a central role in Buddhist practice; the Buddha himself called it "the direct path to realization". But it is to be practiced within a greater context, an entire lifestyle prescribed by the eightfold path. It is a comprehensive system that encompasses one's whole life. Mindfulness supports the rest of the lifestyle, but the lifestyle of Buddhism itself means living in such a way that supports constant mindfulness.

How does living as a Buddhist help me live with bipolar disorder? We can start by looking simply at mindfulness.

"Mindfulness" has become a buzzword in recent years, but originally signified simply having a bare awareness of what is happening in the mind (and all things happen within the mind, including our experience of the outside world), without clinging or rejecting. Every experience has a tone, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and without mindfulness we usually simply react to that feeling in ways that ultimately create stress and keep us trapped. So the first step of mindfulness is to simply be aware in such a way that one is freed from reactivity. Instead of following what reactions come up, one remains still, committed to stillness, and watches the reactions without clinging or rejecting. This stabilizes the mind, brings about calm, and pursued earnestly and diligently, will collect our fragmented minds to a state of wholeness, referred to as *samādhi* in Buddhism. (You'll often see *samādhi* translated as "concentration" but it's also widely agreed that this particular piece of Buddhist Hybrid English does not fit particularly well.) As this process unfolds, a natural sense of well-being accompanied by a natural wisdom emerges from within, and takes over the mind. All we need to do is get out of the way.

That's the Buddhist take on mindfulness. To be honest, I don't spend much time reading about clinical varieties of mindfulness, or so-called McMindfulness, or other forms of pop mindfulness, so I really don't know much about them and their take. Therefore, I won't refer to them again.

The immediate first effect of mindfulness—any meditation practice, really—is to introduce a degree of calm. Usually one begins by anchoring attention on something like the breath, which is very often inherently calming. And when dealing with the rushing of the emotional rapids of bipolar disorder, even a modicum of calm is helpful. If the torrent can be halted, just for a moment, that can mean the difference between a terrible, life-destroying decision or not. This pause is invaluable.

The next thing mindfulness does is introduce some distance between emotional states, and emotionally-driven thoughts, and an impartial observer that is actually aware of mental contents. Thoughts, feelings, perceptions, are regarded as simply things that

happen, rather than being wrapped up in a sense of self. *I* am not the thinker, rather, there are thoughts occurring to an observer who has no content of its own, because it is simple awareness. I am not the one generating the thoughts and feelings. They arise on their own, driven by the machinery of the mind, and I simply note them. The sense of self is disentangled from the thoughts and feelings and emotional complexes, and is thus liberated from them. I can sit and watch them pass by without being caught up in them. They are not mine. They are not me. I need not react to them. I need not recoil from them, nor do I need to hold on to them. Simply watch them arise, allow them to run their course, and watch them pass away. And be open to the next thing that arises.

After cultivating this practice, for a bit, a certain wisdom arises. Certain things feel constricting. I can feel them closing off awareness; I can feel a tightening in my body or mind. Certain things feel liberating. They lead to me feeling opened up, and relaxed, and calm, and even joyful. The mind always naturally inclines to what is most pleasurable, and once it sees the liberating things are indeed more pleasurable—things like compassion and letting go—it automatically chooses those things. There's no willpower even necessary at that stage. Once one begins to see certain pleasures that one has previously chased in order to escape from pain—unhealthy and compulsive patterns with alcohol or sex, for example—once one begins to see those as constricting and not really feeling as good as the alternative, the mind naturally lets go. The Buddha used the image of the natural incline in the land that leads the waters from the mountains, to the rivers, to the ocean, and said in the same way mindfulness practice naturally inclines the mind to freedom and happiness.

Key to all of this is the realization that has *literally* saved my life: Everything is impermanent, inconstant, transient. Everything passes. Everything has a life span and when it is over, it disappears. Every thought. Every feeling. Every mood. *Every mood episode.* There is never a reason to act on my suicidal impulses, because if I simply wait, they will be gone. It may take days or even weeks, but eventually they lose their grip on me. So, before meds, when I was frequently paralyzed with lethargy, unable to get up from my bed or do anything other than think about ways of killing myself, the meditation practice

I had cultivated in my stable moments enabled me to stay still, knowing it would pass, knowing that all I had to do was simply ride it out.

So far we've mostly been discussing mindfulness practice. But there are other aspects of Buddhism that can be brought in to support mental health and work with bipolar disorder. Buddhism isn't a philosophy so much as a training method, at least as originally presented by the Buddha. It comprises three main parts: Training in ethical conduct, training in meditation or mental development, and training in discernment and applying wisdom.

It's not popular to talk about ethics in the modern and postmodern West. Indeed, many Westerners who come to Buddhism as converts are fleeing overly moralizing modes of thinking presented by certain dominant varieties of Christianity. But ethics is fundamental to Buddhist practice.

Ethics or morality function differently in Buddhism than they do in theistic religions. In theistic religions, there is a God who has declared what is right and wrong, and one must obey the God—indeed the cardinal virtue is obedience rather than reasoning out right and wrong for oneself. Buddhism lacks such a God. Everything in Buddhism is directed towards what the Buddha declared as the two things he teaches: The existence of stress and suffering and the cessation of stress and suffering. Ethics is no different. The purpose of ethical behavior in Buddhism is to bring about the end of stress and suffering. And, since stress and suffering are ultimately caused by our own actions, that means at its heart Buddhism is fundamentally an ethical practice.

How does this help with being bipolar? Well, first and foremost, Buddhism provides some simple ethical guidelines we can review and that can guide our actions. If we can keep these ethical guidelines in mind even while having an episode, we can prevent doing a lot of the damage we can do when we're having episodes. Those guidelines are simply not killing, not stealing, not using one's sexuality in ways that harm oneself or others, and being honest. In Buddhism, there's usually a fifth added—no intoxications—but that isn't inherently ethical so much as staying sober supports the four core ethical practices… intoxication to the point of heedlessness risks breaking these principles. These guidelines

are in place because each of these actions will cause harm, either to oneself or to others, and thus generate more stress and suffering. While the cardinal virtue of a theistic religion might be obedience to God, the cardinal virtue of Buddhist ethics is to stop creating more stress and suffering.

Before diving further, I do want to take a moment to acknowledge that this won't always be possible, especially during an episode, when thinking and perceiving is being distorted by the mood, often to the point of delusion. In which case another Buddhist principle, that of apology, comes into play. A certain amount of remorse is good, but just enough that you recognize when you've done wrong, have rectified the situation as much as possible, and have resolved to do better in the future. That is the fundamental dynamic of the Buddhist apology and confession: Understand what you did wrong, do your best to fix it, and resolve not to do it again in the future. Indeed, there is nothing about this that is uniquely Buddhist, but the Buddha did explicitly say that this is what one should do. And this remorse should occur not simply because one made a transgression of a rule, but because one is mindful enough to recognize the harmful impacts. If you can see the harm you are doing, which becomes more clear with mindfulness practice, you will not want to do the harm.

The issue of excessive guilt or remorse comes up as we take a closer look at the dynamics of Buddhist ethical practice. We've already discussed mindfulness and *samādhi*, the aspects of mental development and meditation. It is, quite simply, harder to get settled, and calm, and gain composure when you are plagued with guilt or remorse. The first and best way to be free of the excessive guilt or remorse that prevents you from being settled is to simply not perform the transgression in the first place. That is the main way that ethical practice supports mindfulness meditation. Otherwise, there will be a need to undergo the apology and rectification process.

I'd like to circle back around to the notion of honesty, though, and how that can play a role. Because it doesn't just mean being honest with others…it means being honest with yourself. Zen priest and Vipassanā teacher Gil Fronsdal is fond of saying that the one person one should never, ever lie to, is oneself. Being bipolar means that we will have

difficult emotions, horrible states of mind, and our natural instinct will be to resist them, to hide from them, to pretend they are not there. This is usually going to be the wrong approach, and instead they should be acknowledged. When I'm facing ugly thoughts that I'd rather not have, I must first and foremost be honest with myself that I'm having them. Otherwise I'm giving them even more power than they already have.

Besides resisting, we need to be careful not to cling, as well, and this requires being aware of our clinging and honest with ourselves when we are clinging. I'm in the midst of working something about this out for myself now, in fact. In my last depression episode, I was applying mindfulness to my reactions to my catastrophizing and self-loathing thoughts, and when I stopped resisting them, I realized there was a part of me clinging them. Holding on to them, almost as if they provided some degree of safety or security. Is it that I'm just used to thinking that way, because those are such well-worn grooves in my mind, and that it's frightening to have other modes of thinking? What am I getting out of it?, I am asking myself now.

Which brings us to another way Buddhism can help. The Buddha presented a fivefold analysis that is meant to help us be able to let go of whatever we need to let go of: Origin, cessation, allure, danger, release. Once we find something in our minds we want to let go of, we have to first understand what causes it to arise, in what situations does it appear, and what causes it to go away, to cease. Then we need to understand two more things about it: What is its allure, and what is its danger? Sometimes the allure is obvious: Consumption of alcohol feels good. In which case we may need to look deeply to find the danger: It can become compulsive, and ultimately just postpones the feelings of sorrow until tomorrow, until they are properly dealt with (which usually means allowing them to run their course). With something like anger, the danger is obvious: Besides the harm one can do to others out of anger, there's the simple fact that it just doesn't feel very good to be angry. It hurts. So what's the allure? Often it comes with a sense of power or control, and *that* is what feels good and why we cling to the anger. Once the allure and danger are seen, it is trivial to see the release, which is simply letting go. Once the mind sees through the illusions of gratification, and understands the hazards, it naturally lets go.

It is at this point we are beginning to discuss the wisdom teachings of Buddhism, the third of the threefold training. This is, at its core, the simple fact that we create our own stress and suffering by clinging or resisting to that which is happening. Simple acceptance is the only way out. Note, this does *not* mean resignation, nor is it an endorsement of whatever desire happens to be present—this is not saying, after acknowledging the desire to drink in a harmful way, that one should pursue that desire…that is, after all, clinging to it. What's required is simply being aware and accepting that the desire is happening.

The Buddhist tradition identifies three characteristics that all phenomena have. Everything is transient. Everything has the capacity to be stressful. Nowhere in any particular phenomena can a stable personal identity be found.

Everything is transient. It is inconstant. Things are constantly changing. New thoughts or feelings come into being, old thoughts or feelings pass away. A thought or feeling changes as it passes through its natural life cycle. This holds true for our perceptions of things, too—what we perceive in a pleasing way today may be horrible tomorrow…especially for those of us with the instability of bipolar disorder.

Thus, holding on to any of these constantly shifting and disappearing phenomena is bound to produce stress. They have the inherent capacity for stress, any time we cling to them, try to hold onto that good feeling, or contrarily stave off the bad feeling.

And finally, because these things are constantly shifting, no particular feeling or thought can be identified as being your true identity. Indeed, what we think of as our "self" is really just a story of who we are. It's our own perception, augmented by various trains of thoughts and narratives. Philosopher Daniel Dennett describes the "self" as a "center of narrative gravity". And it is holding on to this narrative that can generate the most stress. When things happen, they happen *to* the self. Feelings and thoughts are appropriated by the self as "mine". "I" am the thinker, "I" am the feeler. When, in fact, simply observing the mind will show that thoughts and feeling arise unbidden…we have no control over them. We are not doing them. I find this much more difficult to see with the doing mind, but even the decisions that get made are done so without the intervention of a conscious self. It's recently been demonstrated that neural activity corresponding to a willful choice occurs

before the conscious mind is even aware of having made that choice, sometimes even by a few seconds. While we may use the personal pronoun "I" as a convention to refer to the complex set of processes whose locus is in the body but which extend outward and interact with the environment, the sense of self that we have, the sense of conscious self, that we tell stories about, is largely an illusion. And it is seeing through this that is the fundamental insight of Buddhism. Once the narratives of self are abandoned, and craving is no longer appropriated as *my* craving, rather it is seen as something that simply arises in the same way that everything else arises and passes away in the same way that everything else passes away, then true liberation is won.

Being Bipolar Helps With Being Buddhist

So practicing Buddhism is unquestionably helpful for treating bipolar disorder. This should now be evident. What may not be so evident is that the converse is also true: Being bipolar actually helps with Buddhist practice! Or at least, it can.

First and foremost, there's the simple recognition of the transience of all things. If we spend any time watching our moods, we know they come and go, and do so in *dramatic* fashion. For those of us who are rapid-cycling, we can go from suicidal despair to egomaniacal adventure over the course of a week…over the course of several if we are not rapid cycling. We can know that our emotions and moods are transient in a deep way that might not be as evident to someone who does not experience our extremes.

If we really watch ourselves during our episodes, it's also clear how our emotions and moods distort our cognition. They create beliefs that *seem so real*, they change how we think about our lives and ourselves in fundamental ways. The radio really does seem to be delivering messages from God straight to us; every random person around us is directly involved in a conspiracy against us; we are the most horrible people to have ever lived. Outside of an episode, these are clearly nonsense, but in an episode, they seem self-evident and undeniable.

Buddhism asserts that essentially *all* thinking is delusional. So it's a small step for us to see how our moods create our more extreme delusions to seeing how even everyday thinking takes us away from direct reality and into a fantasy world. Seeing through the illusions created by thought is one of the goals of the meditation experience. Similarly, our sense of self undergoes dramatic changes, and we have a better opportunity to see how that, too, is illusory, and contingent on particular emotional circumstances rather than an objective fact.

Part of the purpose of samādhi is to access pleasure in ways that are not dependent on external sensory stimulation. This, again, is something many of us are accustomed to. Hypomania is a sheer delight, and it exists apart from anything else that may be happening. Sure, many of us like to accentuate that pleasure with even more sensual pleasures or intoxicants, but left on its own it is still a concrete demonstration that internal joy is possible without relying on sensory stimulation. The pleasure of hypomania is very close to the pleasures that one accesses in samādhi. It's much more within reach for us than it is for someone who lacks those hypomanic experiences.

Buddhism Probably Isn't Enough

I've painted a rosy picture of the interaction of Buddhism and bipolar disorder, but I should follow up and say, in my experience practice of the Dharma is not really enough.

Mindfulness practice is great for neither rejecting nor clinging to the feelings that come up, but during a depression episode, the bad feelings are relentless. A lot of times while dealing with some sort of problem with mindfulness practice, there will be some point at which there's a shift and an opening and a relaxation, and a new dimension opens. This has never been the case for me practicing mindfulness with depression. Indeed, it becomes very exhausting very quickly. The only thing that has ever worked for me to get out of a depression episode is to simply wait it out. No amount of reframing my problems, or meditation, or anything else has ever done the trick. Add to this the problem that it's

often extraordinarily difficult to motivate to do *anything* while depressed. Dharma practice takes effort…effort is literally one of the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. Similarly, in manic episodes, it becomes very difficult to find the stillness that is so central to Buddhist practice.

For these reasons, my practice did not progress much over the decades I was untreated. Once I sought treatment, it was like a whole new world. It stabilized me enough that I had a foundation from which to develop my practice further. Meds don't eliminate episodes entirely…I still have them, but I'm much more able to deal with them, and that's where the Buddhist practice really shines.