


In the Valley of Bad Mindfulness

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View all posts by Jacob Falkovich

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I write Putanumonit on a 7-14 day cycle of satisfaction and anxiety.

When a post is done, I publish it with a mixed sense of relief and giddy expectation. Over the next week, I share links on [LessWrong](#), [Twitter](#) and Facebook, and enjoy the rush of the views and comments rolling in.

After a week passes, I switch to thinking about the next post. If I have a burning obsession with a topic, or if I'm in an altered mind state, the writing flows effortlessly. If nothing is burning, an anxiety starts building in me from day 8 onwards. I open one of my 50 quarter-baked drafts, read and research until my brain fills up with the topic, then write with growing urgency as the self-imposed two-week deadline approaches.

To mark three years of putting a num on it, that is not going to happen this week. In the past couple of weeks, my mood has moved sharply from the top-left corner all the way down. Usually, I welcome the anxiety of a looming post deadline for the motivation it provides. But just now I can't stomach the thought of adding a single [milliBurton](#) of anxiety to my plate.

Instead, I am writing this. This post isn't on a topic, it contains no research, no numbers, little insight. I will describe my mood shift in maddeningly vague language because I can't discuss the causes that relate to actual people. I will write some stupid things about Buddhism. You probably shouldn't read any of it at all.

I've often wondered about something that many ideologies have in common.

- Buddhism: life is suffering, so let go of your desires and attachments to relieve it.
- Christianity: life is suffering, but heaven is worth it.
- Marxism: life is suffering, until the glorious revolution.
- [Jordan Peterson](#): life is suffering, so at least make the suffering meaningful.
- [Antinatalism](#): life is suffering, so don't impose it on new people.

What to do with this, I asked, if I strongly disagree with the first clause? Commenters on the antinatalism post told me that I'm simply wrong – life is suffering and I'm too dumb to realize it. Other people suggested “Transhumanists” and “Brazilians” as two groups that take life to be a pretty sweet deal; I'm certainly a fan of both.

And when I gave all the above examples, a couple of people mentioned that I missed the point of Buddhism entirely. I have listened to writers, meditation teachers, and Thai monks talk about nirvana, but none of them described a concrete experience I could visualize. Whatever they were all pointing at, I thought that the most compelling account of it was written by my friend who took a high dose of LSD every week for 10

months until:

As time went on, I stopped viewing myself as a being separate from the universe. Sensations became interesting to watch, not motivating. I entered such a permanent state of utter peace and contentment that I stopped wanting anything at all. And by the end of it, I barely got out of bed, barely ate. My sleep schedule became erratic, as I woke and slept as I wished. I had vivid lucid dreams. I had stopped working almost entirely and was living off slowly depleting savings. Why would I work? Why would I do anything? I was.... not happy, not sad, I simply *was*. I was free of desire. I did not fear death.

And, ten months in, I realized that's what I was looking at – *death*. I would compulsively whisper “I am dead” under my breath throughout the day. I was an empty vessel. And I realized, that if I kept doing acid, I probably *would* die, out of sheer apathy. I imagined becoming homeless, and that did not worry me. I imagined freezing on the street, and I embraced it.

That sounded like the end of suffering alright. That sounded like something I want no part of.

But I kept hearing that I got it all wrong. That *dukkha* doesn't mean “suffering”, but rather the unsatisfactoriness that is caused by constantly seeking new pleasures. Reducing dukkha will not submerge me in peaceful apathy, rather it will clear the way to contentment and truer happiness.

I decided to pick up 10% Happier, the story of a guy living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with a good job and a beautiful wife who discovers that meditation makes him, well, 10% happier. Bingo, I thought, this is the positive-minded introduction to Buddhism and mindfulness that will speak to me.

The book certainly speaks to me:

According to the Buddha, we have three habitual responses to everything we experience. We want it, reject it, or we zone out. Cookies: I want. Mosquitoes: I reject. The safety instructions the flight attendants read aloud on an airplane: I zone out. Mindfulness is a fourth option, a way to view the contents of our mind with nonjudgmental remove.

Three out of three on the cookies, the mosquitoes, and the flight safety.

Another great line you won't get from a monk:

When you have one foot in the future and the other in the past, you piss on the present.

But there's also another part, one that's inescapable in every discussion of Buddhism:

Everything in the world is ultimately unsatisfying and unreliable because it won't last.

I've heard that line many times, and my reaction has always been: "So fucking what?" What am I supposed to do with the impermanence of everything I care about? Meditate on it until I achieve enlightenment? Not enjoy the ride while I can?

And then, this week, I found out that something I care deeply about is unreliable and impermanent.

Of course, it *always was* unreliable and impermanent. I just kinda ignored this fact. I would acknowledge it if you asked me, but not in depths of my heart. But the evidence kept accumulating and so did my reading about Buddhism, and suddenly they crested over the wall of my protective optimism and hit me like a frying pan to the huevos.

This isn't an indictment of Buddhism. On the path to being less wrong lies The Valley of Bad Rationality. For a smart person who knows nothing of rationality, learning a little bit can make them actively dumber. Perhaps I'm in the valley of bad mindfulness – I went from knowing less than nothing about it to a little more than nothing, and fell to the bottom of the mood chart.

Anxiety, insecurity, and sadness: I experienced those before, of course, but it never felt like they were becoming a part of me the way it feels right now. I really wanted to write an entertaining post full of puns (a fun post pun-fest?) this week. But I'm too sad to enjoy geeking out, too insecure to feel like I could write it well, and too anxious to add the anxiety of having to finish it to the rest of the things I'm now worrying about to the point of sleeplessness.

I'm not sharing this post on social media or cross-posting it on LessWrong. If you've read so far, it's because you love Putanumonit, or your friend who shared the link does, and you trusted that you'll enjoy my writing more than you trusted my warning at the top.

Thank you.

For all that I ignored impermanence and unreliability in other areas, I felt the opposite about blogging. When I started Putanumonit I gave it six months, a year at most, before I gave up or ran out of ideas or just moved on to the next shiny thing. But it's been coming, every 14 days at most, for three years. Blogging makes me really happy, and I wouldn't be blogging without readers.

Everything in the world is unsatisfying and unreliable. That's true for you as well. All I can hope to do is to make Putanumonit a little more satisfying and reliable than whatever else is going on for you.

I'll see you in two weeks.