Brett M. Rhyne
617-818-5871
BMR@BrettMRhyne.com
WC: 4,672

The Role Meditation May Play in Journalism

by Brett M. Rhyne

At least once a semester, I talk to my journalism students about the effects a regular meditative practice may have on their reporting. As a former reporter and editor, I believe sitting in meditation can help make them better journalists, by making them more aware of their internal states and therefore more mindful of their reactions to news events and developments and how they cover them. Increased awareness of a reporter's internal states and reactions can be especially helpful when he or she is faced with two kinds of news environments: moments of acute human suffering; and when beset by particularly aggressive authority figures and regimes. Journalists' responses to two recent, ongoing stories are particularly illustrative of this point: news workers' general reactions to the pain and suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina; and reporters' and editors' general reactions to the antipathy shown them by the Bush administration.

In class, I introduce this topic during a wider discussion of objectivity. There are two kinds of objectivity, I argue: external and internal. To illustrate external objectivity, I place an object — a globe, if one's at hand — in the center of the room and ask the students to describe it from where they sit. As we go around the circle, students describe their views of the Earth tilted on its axis: Australia, the Pacific, North America, Greenland and so on. The point, I explain, is that we can't help but see the material world from our own particular perspectives; and since no two of us occupy the same physical space, we can't ever see exactly the same thing at the same time.

This is the Cartesian, dualist definition of subjectivity: it makes a clear distinction between the "I" and the world, the self and the other. Since journalism as it is practiced today is a product of such Western thinking, it's at the root of journalistic discussions of objectivity. The stories reporters cover are like a globe: they can't always see the other side, but they know it's there. In order to provide as comprehensive and accurate a picture of reality as they can, therefore — in other words, in order to approximate objectivity —they get information from sources to describe aspects of a story that they can't see themselves.

Over the years, journalists have developed tools to help them be more mindful of their subjectivity without having to reinvent the wheel every time they write a story. Two of the most familiar and useful of these conventions are the concepts of *balance* and *fairness*. Writing a *balanced* story means incorporating enough distinct perspectives or positions to approximate a comprehensive picture of what's happening. Writing a *fair* story means reporting those perspectives truthfully, so that all together they provide an accurate representation of events.

The application of these *concepts* by journalists to their work should not be confused with the appropriation of these *terms* by pseudo news outlets, such as the Fox News Channel. Employing doublespeak in the best "Ignorance is Knowledge" tradition, the marketers at Fox use *fair* and *balanced* to describe information that is exactly the opposite of those ideals. There is no balance: multiple distinct perspectives are not incorporated, so the coverage is not comprehensive. And oppositional perspectives are not reported truthfully, so there is no fairness. While Fox and other sensationalist entertainment media seem to have captured the public's consciousness regarding news,

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it's worth noting that there are still scores of reputable news outlets employing legions of trustworthy journalists with integrity. Unlike their ersatz cousins, who embrace their subjective viewpoints while trying to pass them off as objective, these journalists recognize the limitations of their subjective experience of reality. They strive to escape from their subjectivity, and conventions such as balance and fairness are helpful tools in that struggle.

While these concepts may help reporters seeking to capture the whole story for their readers, they only aid journalists in acknowledging the limitations of their objectivity in the material world, the world of things, of words, of social interaction — the world we share. But we also inhabit another realm: a world of sensations, of thoughts, of feelings. If the material realm we share is the external world, let's borrow a term from Buddhist psychology and call the other realm the internal world. When we sit in meditation, we allow "mind-objects" to cross our awareness. Some mind-objects, like a sound in the room or a breeze on our skin, are perceptions of the external world. Some mind-objects, like memories, emotions or trains of thought, are perceptions of the internal world. Equally important for reporters striving to approach objectivity in their stories is the identification and acknowledgement of the limitations of their objectivity in the internal world.

Before going further, I need to make something clear. Much of the academic criticism of the journalism industry, from Ben Bagdikian's work to that of my mentor, Herbert I. Schiller, has focused on the corporate ownership of news media and its impact on the content and practices of journalism. That's a compelling critique, and one with which I generally agree. I do want to make a distinction, though, between that kind of

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internal *organizational* subjectivity, which skews news coverage in favor of the interests of corporate ownership, and what I'm talking about here: psychic and emotional biases within each of us that cloud our views of the world and don't allow us to see or represent the world accurately.

Let's, for a moment, return to my students' experiences with the globe. That was a physical example of external objectivity, illustrating the limitations of each student's perspective on the material world. From there, it's a short step to apply that example to the internal realm. The metaphor is that each of us is in our distinct psychic spaces as well as material spaces, and so, just as we always have unique physical perspectives on events in the material world, so too do we always have unique intellectual and emotional perspectives on events in the material world. We see the globe from where we are in the classroom, the material realm. We also experience the world from where we are in psychic space; in other words, we perceive events through the lens of our emotions, thoughts, ideologies, memories.

It is relatively easy for reporters, or for any of us, to become aware of our place in the physical world — our external subjectivity — and make adjustments to be fairer, more balanced, more objective. Becoming aware of our place in the psychic realm — our internal subjectivity — and making adjustments is more challenging. Indeed, the only way to approach objectivity in the internal world is to become enlightened and reach nirvana, that transcendent state in which there is neither suffering, desire, nor sense of self. What's more, there are no conventions equivalent to balance and fairness in the internal world to help us along. As the Indian mystic Jiddu Krishnamurti said, "Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever."

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Recognizing the futility of striving for some kind of internal objectivity, Buddhist philosophy suggests we work, instead, toward being *detached*. In this context, detachment refers to a stepping back, to observing or perceiving or experiencing events dispassionately; not without interest, but without reactivity. We don't allow our preexisting feelings, thoughts or beliefs to affect how we perceive events, and we don't instinctively react to events based on those preexisting feelings, thoughts or beliefs. This is where meditation may begin to be helpful to journalists. In order to transcend their reactivity, they need to become aware of their internal states, their feelings, thoughts and beliefs. Among those who sit regularly, side effects of the practice may include a raised consciousness about internal states. Meditators can often more readily ask and answer questions like: What am I thinking? What am I feeling? And, simply, what am I?

Insights like these offer wisdom to journalists covering stories of acute human suffering, like man-made or natural disasters. Many reporters and photographers have expressed the dilemmas they faced while covering Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, especially in the context of a dearth of humanitarian aid being provided by official entities. What should I do? they wondered. Should I intercede on behalf of the people I'm supposed to be covering, or should I remain objective? Where do I draw the line between detached observer and engaged participant in events? Reporters throughout the Gulf Coast struggled to balance the ethics of journalistic non-interference in events with the humanist compassion they felt for those they were reporting on. Ultimately, there were as many responses to the dilemma as there were journalists facing it; and generally speaking, the journalistic community commended reporters on their choice, regardless of where they fell on the journalist–human being spectrum. Still, making such choices caused the

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reporters great pain, and assessing those choices was only slightly less traumatic for the members of the wider community of journalists. Greater self-awareness, a by-product of sitting, may help journalists struggling with these issues.

Journalists in situations involving human suffering, great or small, may also find solace in another possible consequence of meditation: an increased capacity for compassion. Sitting encourages us to turn toward our pain, to identify it, to hold it without reacting to it. During and after Katrina, many journalists reported being so overwhelmed by the suffering they observed that they felt compelled to act. Reporters who meditate may be able to feel compassion for their subjects, hold it, and still remain mindful of their reactions. Sitting allows us to separate our feelings of compassion from our urges to act on those feelings. That's not to say journalists wouldn't or shouldn't act when they see suffering; but increased mindfulness might allow them to make better-informed choices, rather than acting impulsively.

An increased capacity for compassion may offer solace to reporters in painful situations in another way, too. Sitting not only fosters our ability to feel others' pain; regular practice supports our having compassion for ourselves, too. Journalists covering an event like Katrina may acknowledge that they have conflicting feelings about helping their subjects, and that this dilemma is, in fact, causing them pain. Again, the increased mindfulness associated with meditation allows them to identify the dilemma they are experiencing and hold it, without feeling compelled to act on it impetuously.

A further benefit of having compassion for ourselves is that we are more comfortable with our decisions and less likely to second-guess ourselves. This is not because we are more likely to make the wise choice, although that may be the case, since

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we are more reflective in the moment we are making the decision. It's because, inherent in compassion, is the notion of acceptance without judgment. In the same way that we don't fault others for the decisions they make when they are in pain, neither do we fault ourselves for the decisions we make when we are in pain.

That's not to say we absolve ourselves of responsibility for our choices and consequent actions. Quite the contrary. Rather than not knowing what we are thinking or feeling and so act impulsively, we are more aware of our decisions and behaviors. We take responsibility for them. But since we have compassion for ourselves — we know the choices and actions were made while we were in pain — we can accept responsibility without judgment, without feeling blame or guilt.

Yet another benefit of being more compassionate is that it allows reporters to better understand and more fairly and accurately report on the psychology and motivations of their subjects. This is particularly true of those subjects who are unpopular or take unpopular positions. In the previous example, reporting that failed to take into account the psychologies and motivations of Michael Brown, regional FEMA officials, Michael Chertoff and President Bush tended to demonize them and therefore tell the story from the victims' perspective, rather than from a more detached, and therefore more insightful, perspective.

Acknowledging we are all in pain and becoming aware of our reactions to that pain is a basic tenet of meditative practice. The potential for a meditative practice to temper journalists' reactivity to pain also applies to events less calamitous than Katrina. I'm thinking here of instances when those in positions of power have abused their power to intimidate journalists and news-gathering organizations; specifically, the Bush

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administration's hostility to the press, and the subsequent aggressive behaviors of some of its members toward individual reporters and news organizations.

For its first five years, members of the Bush administration treated the press as their personal public relations organ, rewarding those reporters who promoted its agenda and punishing those who dared to challenge the administration or even question its actions. The administration took many approaches to enforcing its will on the press, including manipulating access to information to compromise and discredit journalists, as it did with Judith Miller of *The New York Times* and syndicated columnist Robert Novak; ensnaring reporters with legal measures, as it did with Matthew Cooper of *Time*; bringing to bear economic pressure on corporate ownership to oust journalists, as it did with Dan Rather and his team of producers at CBS; and even using military action, as it did when the Al-Jazeera TV network bureau in Baghdad was (accidentally) bombed by American forces.

In those first five years of the Bush administration, journalists reacted to such aggression fearfully. Their fear caused them to act in an overly cautious manner, which in turn created a chilling effect on coverage and stifled the Fourth Estate's efforts to act as a check on power. These may have been the hoped-for effects of administrative aggression, but they were not caused by that aggression; rather, they were caused by journalists' *chosen reactions* to that aggression. We are all responsible for our own behavior: administration officials are no more responsible for journalists' fearful actions and reactions than journalists are responsible for administration officials' aggressive ones.

A series of developments turned journalists' fear into anger. The tide of public support for President Bush and his policies turned, culminating in the 2006 Democratic

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electoral successes. More and more of the administration's callous actions or inactions personally affected journalists, including the manipulation of reporters throughout the outing of Valerie Plame Wilson, the Fitzgerald grand jury investigation, and the subsequent trial of I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby; the embarrassment of journalists for capitulating to the "embedding" of reporters and to the vigorous government censorship during the Iraq War; the suffering witnessed and experienced by reporters during Hurricane Katrina; and so on. Journalists are furious with this government, and their anger shows in their coverage, just as their fear did.

Please note that both reactions, fear and anger, are normal, understandable responses to the powerlessness we feel when confronted with aggression. They're also two of humans' most basic impulses, paired in the so-called fight-or-flight instinct. In fact, most acts of aggression can be traced to feelings of fear and anger. Please note, as well, that members of any administration who act aggressively toward the press are probably motivated by the same fight-or-flight instinct. Administration officials aren't self-aware enough to choose a more reasoned response, and they can't very well flee from press criticism, so they see fighting as their only choice.

Of course, none of us has control over the actions of another, and so journalists have no control over the Bush people's aggressive actions. What we can control, though, are our reactions to aggression. Unlike animals, whose behaviors are determined by a menu of learned and inherited instincts, humans can choose how we will respond to external stimuli, like aggression. This is where, again, meditation may be beneficial. Many of those who regularly meditate report an increased capacity for pain; that is, they can experience a painful sensation and hold it longer, without needing to act on it. This

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increased capacity for pain is what may allow reporters to experience administrative aggression and, instead of reacting fearfully, choose a more reasoned response. Choosing a more reasoned response is a more productive approach to aggression from the material (or political) perspective, since it's more likely to resolve the situation.

Admittedly, it is difficult to resist reacting instinctively when we are confronted with aggression. Meditating may help with this, too. A regular meditative practice may help increase our capacity for compassion, for the ability to feel another's pain. This comes, first, from developing more compassion for ourselves through sitting; after all, sitting — just being — is hard! From there, we begin to have more compassion for others. So when we are confronted with aggression, we're more skilled at pausing and considering why our aggressors are behaving in this way. The answer is often this: they're acting aggressively because they're angry, or afraid; in turn, their anger or fear is an instinctive reaction to… aggression. They're been hurt. They're in pain. We're all in pain. We all suffer. This is how a regular meditative practice may help us develop compassion for our aggressors.

For the injured to have compassion for the aggressor — whether it's journalists feeling injured by the Bush administration, or anyone feeling injured by those with power over them — is also a more appropriate response to aggression from the karmic perspective. *Karma* can be understood simply as, if you act unwisely, you pay for it. By acting aggressively, we cause injury; causing injury is unwise; acting unwisely creates karma; implicit in the idea of karma is that the injuries we cause are eventually revisited upon us. This, of course, requires a leap of faith: that karma exists, and that none of us can escape our karma. Those of us who think we can escape our karma, and so continue

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to act hurtfully, just inflict more suffering upon ourselves. But what is suffering? Suffering, Buddhism suggests, comes from *attachment*, which is an irrational and often unrealized desiring or avoidance of a mind-object. We may desire or seek to avoid any manner of mind-object, internal or external, including material objects, physical and emotional sensations, thoughts, ideologies, whatever. Attachments can prevent us from experiencing the world as it truly is, since our perception may be skewed by what we want or don't want to experience. This discrepancy between reality and our perception of reality is what ultimately causes our suffering.

In the current example, journalists, rather than reacting fearfully or angrily to the aggressive actions of the Bush administration, might have done better to step back and consider why their aggressors were behaving that way. If they had, they might have surmised that many members of the Bush administration are attached to a worldview that inhibits their ability to see the world clearly. Given the contradictions between reality and the neo-cons' worldview, this attachment causes them pain, and they instinctively react to this suffering with fear and anger. Afraid and angry, members of the Bush administration act aggressively toward *their* perceived aggressors: journalists, certainly, as well as the poor, minorities, non-Christians, Democrats, intellectuals, political moderates, the French, Saddam Hussein, North Korea, Iran… the list goes on and on. In short, the neo-cons perceive anyone who publicly challenges with their worldview — who highlights the contradictions between their worldview and reality — as aggressive. The mere existence of many of these groups and people, such as liberals and Hugo Chavez, is an implied challenge to this worldview. Other challenges are more explicit, as was the case with journalists, or Joe Wilson, which may help explain why the Bush administration saved its

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most vituperative attacks for them. Regardless, members of the Bush administration cannot incorporate or even consider any challenge to their worldview. They can only defend against the challenge, because they are attached to it. Such is the nature of attachment.

Had journalists recognized this sooner, they might have covered the Bush administration with more insight — with more compassion, even — and thus broken the karmic cycle of aggression that ensued. By reacting less strongly, journalists might have caused Bush administration officials less pain, in turn giving them less to react to and, perhaps, helping them to react less strongly themselves. Now, I realize I may be asking a lot when I urge us to have compassion for members of the Bush administration, especially when their actions have affected so many people so adversely. Please remember, though, that being compassionate is not the same as absolving someone from their responsibilities. It's seeing the world as it truly is, unclouded by reactions to pain such as fear, anger, blame or shame. Exercising compassion for someone who hurts us does require another leap of faith: that the karmic wheel does indeed turn, and that those who act unwisely do indeed pay for it. It's difficult for some of us to grasp that the agent of that payback may not be the injured party; but rest assured, the person who creates karma by injuring others does suffer for it.

This approach doesn't absolve the aggressive Bush administration, so much as it changes the form and agency of the retribution. Think about it. Already, members of the Bush administration and the neo-cons are suffering, individually and collectively, for their behavior: many have lost their jobs or been driven from office by scandal or loss of public confidence; many have been brought before courts of law or disciplinary panels;

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and the approval ratings of its two top administrators are mired at historic lows. Within months of his reelection in 2004, President Bush was deemed a lame duck and his legislative agenda dismissed; and there seems to be a widely-held sense that his legacy will be as "the worst president ever." And this is just the suffering inflicted in the material realm; we have no way of knowing what kind of pain they are feeling internally, but I suspect it's great. It was great to begin with — which is why they acted so hurtfully in the first place — and I suspect it's even greater now.

And yet, there are those who still feel this approach lets Bush administration officials off the hook for their hurtful behaviors. This feeling, I suggest, comes from attachment, which is what allows us to be injured in the first place. If journalists are angry at the Bush administration for denying them access to information, they're protecting their feeling that they have a right to know. Journalists do indeed have a right to know, but getting angry about being denied that right is neither productive nor karmically appropriate. Better to acknowledge the existence of that denial of access without the sense of entitlement, understand the motivations behind it, and choose a response that is more productive and appropriate. By not attaching to the right to know, journalists can respond to the situation as it is, not as they would like it to be. Attachment is the "hook;" by not attaching, we let ourselves off the hook, not our aggressors.

Which brings me to my final point regarding how meditation may help journalists. Just as important as having compassion for others is having compassion for ourselves. Buddha said, "You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection." When others injure us, it is helpful to remain mindful of this sentiment and not injure ourselves, as well. To illustrate this, Buddha used a metaphor of

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two arrows. The first arrow is the pain inflicted upon us from without, which we can't avoid; the second arrow is the pain we inflict upon ourselves, which we can avoid. Bush administration officials shot the first arrow when they injured journalists by acting aggressively toward them. In doing so, they created karma for themselves. Journalists who reacted fearfully or angrily, because they were attached to their right to know and so failed to see the situation accurately, injured themselves by shooting the second arrow *into themselves*. In this way, the journalists unwisely inflicted injury upon themselves and thus created karma. By being more mindful of their internal states in the moment of the first injury, by holding those feelings of entitlement to information without acting on them impetuously, and then by choosing a more appropriate response, journalists could have broken this cycle of aggression and reaction, of creating karma. In encouraging self-awareness, meditation might have helped foster such a sense of non-reactivity.

Non-reactivity is not the same as inaction. We can still work toward achieving social change and a more just world — if that is what we want to do — but we will do that work mindfully, fully aware of our internal states and how they may influence our perceptions and actions. Indeed, awareness of our attachments to events in the external world may make us more effective activists — if that is what we want to be— since we won't be unknowingly distracted or diverted by inappropriate reactions rooted in our emotions, thoughts, memories, ideologies and so on. But journalists, when covering stories, are not activists; they're documentarians. In their work, reporters do not strive for social change or a more just world, although those are often the results of good journalism.

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Is internal objectivity even possible? Well, those who meditate may occasionally experience a sense of no-self, where the "I" — the subjective viewpoint — disappears completely. In these moments, we lose our attachment to, or identification with, our limited sense of self or the ego. If there is no attachment to, or identification with, this limited sense of self, what is there to be injured? This sense of no-self also allows for completely clear vision: with no thoughts or feelings to orient our view, we experience the world directly and holistically, not from a distinct perspective. The sense of no-self is fleeting, as are all experiences in meditation, as are all experiences in life. We may carry these experiences with us from one realm to another, though, and therein lies the benefit.

Even a glimpse of a sense of no-self may help journalists to be more objective. With less of an ego to be injured, they may be less reactive, more detached and more observant in their perceptions of world events; and without a biased and biasing perspective from which to see events, they can be more accurate and comprehensive in their telling of the story.

To help explain this notion of no-self, Buddha employed a metaphor of four clay vessels. He was talking about listeners or students, but I think it's equally applicable to journalists. The first clay vessel, he said, has holes in it; the water you pour in runs right out. In other words, whatever you teach that person is useless. I'm pleased to note very few journalists fall into this category.

The second clay vessel is cracked; the water you pour into it seeps out. These people cannot remember; they can't put two and two together. They have cracks in their understanding. I think a few more journalists are in this group, but their inability to make historical connections in their stories or to think critically oftentimes has less to do with

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personal shortcomings than it does with deadline pressures or economic pressures, which have led to short-staffed newsrooms.

The third clay vessel is so completely full; it can't hold any more water. Such people, Buddha said, are so full of views they can't learn anything new. These are the journalists I've been writing about, and for, today. This is us. We may not be as full as Buddha's clay vessel, but we all, whether we realize it or not, hold thoughts and feelings that prejudice our reporting. And this is where meditation may help.

The fourth clay vessel is without any holes or cracks, and completely empty; ready take in and retain a great deal of water. This is the journalistic ideal: to perceive the world accurately, without preconceptions; to put events and developments in historical, social and cultural context, with detachment; and to be able to describe those events and developments fairly, with balance.

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