

Mindfulness and Modern Life

HCOL 40023-655

Spring 2020

“I am That” assignment



For this assignment, you should write up and interpret the notes you will take during the two-week “I am That” meditation that we will describe in class on **Tuesday, March 24**. Your final essay should be between 750 and 1000 words. The paper is due in the “I am That” dropbox before class on **Thursday, April 9**.

As background to the paper, the religious traditions that emerged from India—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and others—subscribe to the *samsara* paradigm we described at the beginning of the semester wherein time is understood to be cyclical. In *samsara*, our actions produce good and bad karma that lead us to be reborn in distinct realms of a variously understood cosmological system. The ultimate goal is to attain liberation from this cycle, whether understood as Hinduism’s *moksha*, Buddhism’s *nirvana*, and so on. Each tradition sets forth a particular path to attain that ultimate freedom—in Buddhism, for instance, practitioners follow the Eightfold Noble Path that includes ethics, mental cultivation, and wisdom.

The Buddhist view of the *self* we will discuss in class maintains that the “I” represents a constantly changing amalgamation of the five *skandhas*, or aggregates, which include consciousness—the fifth *skandha*. In this view, the “I” we perceive represents no more than a fictitious unity that becomes an object of intense clinging, which causes us to suffer. Thus, the goal of contemplative and ethical practice is to slowly gain greater insight into the nature of reality and to see through that fiction. In so doing, we come to recognize and appreciate our interdependence—in Thich Nhat Hanh’s words, our “interbeing”—with all that we perceive to be outside ourselves. The notions of *selflessness* and *interbeing* are woven into several of the semester’s readings, but also appears in Shunryu Suzuki’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, a book Mark uses in his Buddhism class. In that book, Suzuki states: “What we call ‘I’

is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale” (29). And in his introduction to the book, Richard Baker states:

The practice of Zen mind is beginner’s mind. The innocence of the first inquiry—what am I?—is needed throughout Zen practice. The mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind which can see things as they are, which step by step and in a flash can realize the original nature of everything.

This “I am That” exercise asks you to engage in a type of meditation in which you will try to channel that beginner’s mind so that you can, in turn, attempt to answer this deceptively simple question: “What am I?” In that meditation, you will investigate your perceiving “I,” or self, which constantly appears in your thought and speech. In a single day, you will repeat this simple words many, many times. What does it refer to? What is the essence of that referent?

But the title of the assignment actually is taken from Indian master Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj’s famous book, *I am That*. We have made available on D2L two brief excerpts from the book that you are welcome to read, although they’re not required. They offer background on his teachings, which encourages us to relentlessly investigate this “I” by pondering its essence and source. To do so, we must remain aware, *mindful* in the language of Buddhism, of the workings of our minds and our perceptions of the so-called *self*. He writes in this regard:

By being with yourself... by watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest, with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge, because it is there, you encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and consciousness with its captive energies. This is the great work of awareness; it removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence (Quoted in Jon Kabat-Zinn’s *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, 10).

Andy was trained in the Hindu philosophical system known as Advaita Vedanta upon which Maharaj’s teachings are based. Indeed, in several of the Hindu traditions, the *atman*—the “I” or self—is understood to be part of Brahman, the ultimate reality. For instance, in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, an early Hindu text, this sentiment is expressed in the story of the father and son Uddalaka and Shvetaketu. The latter teaches his son that the self we perceive dissolves into this ultimate reality, just like salt dissolves into water. Most do not recognize this relationship, however, because they are blinded by *maya*, or “illusion.”

Mark has used this exercise in his Mindfulness and Millennials colloquium three times and Buddhism course once with fascinating results despite its vagueness. Andy and Mark used it in spring 2019 in their Contemplating the Self colloquium. Please try your best and write to us if you get stuck.