

# Cushion and Couch

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## From the Editor

*Cushion and Couch* is IMP's quarterly e-journal, featuring articles, interviews and book reviews written by and for members of our community. If you would like to contribute pieces or offer feedback, please reach out by [e-mail](#).

Alex Gokce, MSW  
Editor, *Cushion and Couch*

# Māna

by Paul R. Fulton

My entry point into Buddhist practice was its teachings on *anatta*, the illusory nature of self. As a teenager, I intuitively felt that the problem was the self, and here was a tradition that said as much, and even offered a method by which to be done with it. Or so I thought. Enlightenment, I imagined, was deep and irreversible insight into the emptiness of self that destroyed it once and for all. Sign me up.

Of course, this was a grave misunderstanding. The Buddha taught that that self is a phenomenon conditioned by grasping, ultimately empty of enduring essence. It could appear when conditions supported it, lie nascent when they didn't, ready to spring up at the least provocation, with unfortunate consequences. He didn't claim the self simply didn't exist, or could be made permanently so.

Under any circumstances, I can report that my enterprise to do away with self has not gone well. This is not to say that my understanding and experience of self has remained unchanged, but nor can I say I'm "rid of it," or given the years left to me, that I can expect to be. Perhaps this level of realization is reserved for the meditation professionals, nuns and monks, or the exceptionally adept layperson.

As a psychotherapist, I regularly hear the refrain of self-doubt and insecurity, often arising from the ubiquitous tendency to compare ourselves to others, either favorably or unfavorably. This is just as common for the well-published, well-respected and accomplished tenured professor as it is to the less decorated. Remarkably, being successful offers no immunity against the ongoing measuring of ourselves relative to others. A favorable comparison only partly softens the sting, because the pleasure of feeling superior is always precarious, subject to being erased with one untoward interaction. Once this comparing mind arises, it threatens to negate any nourishment we may have gained from our accomplishments. Self-esteem is like that, in constant renegotiation, never a truly finished product immune from deflation.

Psychoanalyst Alfred Adler wrote about how our need to be secure in our self-esteem is a primary motivation in our conscious and unconscious lives. When this need for self-esteem is mixed with the basic narcissism that seems a universal feature of human experience, the result, according to sociologist Ernest Becker, is "...a creature who has to feel himself an object of primary value..." This sense of personal value and self-worth are constituted symbolically in, for example, our personas expressed in interactions with others, often in a form imperfectly disguised from others and ourselves. How we fare in this enterprise hardly feels trivial; the stakes can seem terribly high.

One (relatively extreme) expression of this is the desire for fame, pursued in the hope finding permanent protection against insignificance and, as Becker argued, the impinging awareness of mortality. Any culturally common value can become employed to distinguish oneself, including wealth, notoriety, athletic or intellectual prowess, or even spirituality. This enterprise is bound to fail: Research has shown that those more devoted to such extrinsic rewards (e.g., recognition and acclaim) suffer more distress than those who are motivated by the search for self-acceptance, meaningful relationships, and other intrinsic rewards.

I've periodically conducted informal polls during lectures, confirming by a show of hands that everyone is familiar with this experience of *comparing* oneself. In clinical practice, however, patients often hold this as evidence of a personal problem or disorder, compounding the problem by turning it into evidence of further failure of self-mastery. (I wrote more on this phenomenon of turning suffering into evidence of disorder in a 2015 article for *Insight Journal* entitled ["Insecurity, Self-criticism, and Impermanence."](#))

As a student of Buddhist psychology, I understand this tendency to compare oneself (including the motive to inflate oneself relative to others) is universal, a consequence of holding to distorted views of the self (*sakkya ditthi*, in Pali). This phenomenon of comparing, termed *māna* in Pali, is often translated as 'conceit,' and is described in the *Sutta Pitaka* as one of the 10 fetters (*samyōjana*). These fetters, which bind and blind us to the cycle of becoming, fall away step-wise with progress through the "four paths" of awakening, from stream-enterer (*sotapanna*), once-returner (*sakadagami*), non returner (*anagami*), and finally the full awakening of the *arahant*. *Māna*, alas, is one of the last to go. It remains a steady companion until *arahanthood*, the end of the road.

This seems like both bad and good news. The bad news is that most of us are stuck with it for the foreseeable future. But the good news is that because we're stuck with it, we don't have to worry too much about this nettlesome mental habit; because we have little choice we don't have to feel extra badly about the suffering already inherent in that moment of comparing. It is, we might say, what you get for being born human. Perhaps the best we might do, as we travel the path of practice, is to hold this unwelcome companion with bemused tolerance.

This is not to say there is nothing to be done, or that the comparing mind is intractable. Like all other afflictive habits, they deserve investigation through the loving attention of mindfulness. And like other habits, their grip on us abates when our relationship to them shifts from *being possessed by*—and identified with—to *being known* in mindful awareness. In that moment of being seen clearly, there is a touch of freedom, which gradually weakens the hold these habits have on us.

How is it that *māna* should endure even through the monumental shifts that occur with each stage of awakening? Among the fetters said to drop away at the first awakening of the stream-enterer is *sakkāya-ditthi*, often translated as “personality view,” or the mistaken identification of self with any of the *khandas* that comprise our experience of self. If this delusion is dropped at first path, how does *māna* endure? Shouldn't *māna* be swept clear as devotion to the illusory self is lifted? If *māna* persists through the experience of the non-returner, what does this say about the lingering vestiges of attachment to a false view of self? Are they distinct processes, or is *māna* merely a more persistent and subtle remnant of “personality view”?

With insight into “personality view,” our attachment to the aggregates (*khandas*) is weakened, but the presumption of a “me” persists. In this sense, *māna* is more than the tendency toward interpersonal comparison, but also points to enduring clinging to the self. Even as the tendency to compare is progressively quieted along the way, this presumption of a separate “me” is only finally eradicated when all greed, hatred and delusion are finally permanently uprooted.

Some years ago I had a conversation with a Zen teacher who said she had met many highly trained spiritual teachers in her life, not one of whom had no self. This, too, is faintly reassuring and disappointing. I've read a number of first-person accounts of profound experiences of awakening, some only to be followed by a disheartening regression into reactivity, anger, or greed. So, what are we to make of first-person accounts of awakening? Either the experience of awakening was not actually *stream entry*, or by itself such experiences are insufficient to assure that self won't arise again when conditions dictate. Evidently, these fetters are not discrete on-or-off conditions, but can lurk in weakened and latent form, becoming more ‘fetttersome’ when stimulated into action.

What is a non-*arahant* to do? Like with all such afflictions, the remedy is described in the Eightfold Path. Supported by mindful and compassionate attention, we become aware of the pull these mental habits exert on our well-being. Though awareness of *māna* can be humbling and discomfiting, without such awareness we are at its mercy. With awareness of this lingering companion comes the possibility of holding our limitations in wisdom and compassion, and avoiding the trap of trying to feed an insatiable hunger.

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# Don't Do Something . . . Just Sit There

*by Edward Ryan*

A person decides to do something, let's say, to go to see a therapist. When he gets there, the therapist will tell him what to do, and he will do it. And then the therapist will do something, and then perhaps tell him what he should do between now and the next meeting. He will then go and do something and come back to report on what he's done and how it worked. The therapist will then do something else.

Another person decides to do something, let's say, to go on a meditation retreat. When she gets there, the teacher will tell her what to do, and she will do it. And then she will tell the teacher what she has done, and the teacher will tell her to do something, perhaps what to do between now and the next interview. She will then go and do something and come back and report on what she's done and how it worked. The teacher will then do something else.

In both situations, all involved may feel that something is getting done, something that needs doing. And it is getting done by doing.

I know this is a central view of our culture, to do something and to get it done.

Yet, in my experience, one cannot do therapy and one cannot do meditation. But wouldn't it seem weird for a therapist, or for a meditation teacher, to say: Let's just sit here together and see what may arise? And wouldn't it seem even weirder for a person going to see a therapist or a meditation teacher to make a similar suggestion?

Once, many years ago, I was working in an outpatient clinic in a large hospital, and most of the clientele were severely mentally ill. I was assigned a fellow who had been hospitalized on and off for over ten years, who had made two very serious suicide attempts, and who remained psychotic despite taking strong medications. The referring doctor told me he needed an exorcist more than a therapist. Well, he and I began meeting, and after a couple of years, the fellow told me he had stopped taking all of his medications about a year earlier. I told the psychiatrist who prescribed those meds. Later that week the chief of the clinic stopped me in the hall to ask me what I was doing with him, since everyone had noticed that he was doing so much better. I said I wasn't doing anything, we just met and talked. He asked me what we talked about, and I said mostly about golf, because the man liked to play golf. The chief asked me whether I would like to present the case to the whole department, but I said no thanks. He said I should do it, to let others know what I was doing. I said I wasn't doing anything,

and I didn't think many of my colleagues would like to hear that, wouldn't believe it. The fellow and I were just sitting there.

I was also just sitting there, one snowy winter's night in a meditation center (IMS) on a retreat. I was just sitting there in the dark, in my room, between tea and the evening talk. And I experienced an awareness that this is not my body. I didn't think it. I wasn't thinking about this body or myself. It's as if I heard it, only it wasn't quite that, not an inner voice. All I can say is that at that moment I knew it. It was as if I was sitting out under a tree on a spring day, looking at the sky, and a bird flew into view. I saw it. I knew a bird flew by. Just sitting there.

There is awareness, there is always awareness. Sometimes when we are busy doing, we are distracted from awareness. We may think we are working toward having awareness, but we are actually working toward being distracted. Awareness may be revealed to us when we are just sitting there, doing nothing.

Lilies of the field

what the world calls

just doing nothing

Sylvia Forges-Ryan

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# Of Two Chairs, a Rug, and the Evolution of Data-Processing Units

*by Douglas Baker*

My client, a married man in his late 50s, and I have known each other some 8 or 9 years, through several episodes of therapy, at times involving his wife. He had previously been in a mindfulness-based therapy group I ran, and also attended, at my encouragement, a residential Vipassana meditation retreat, which I also attended. Attending the same retreat was an unusual move in terms of therapeutic boundaries and my self-revelation, perhaps a Hail Mary of sorts on my part—a bold invitation to accompany him to venture into the world and find belonging. Our relationship has been complex, flexible and rich.

He struggles with depression, paralyzing ruminations of unworthiness, and a deeply conditioned tendency to avoid new and unknown experiences. Panic attacks in his 20s left him persistently distrustful of his body and nervous system. Verbally violent, spirit-crushing parental outbursts left him primally fearful of people. He's riddled with self-doubt still, amidst helpful mindfulness-based insight that his thoughts are frequently distorted, the past is long gone, and to a lesser degree, that his affect isn't a direct threat. He lingers in a bardo between liberation and imprisonment, mind full of dharma and CBT, deep nervous system and core beliefs riddled with poison.

It's late November 2022, and we've been meeting in person again since September. Recent sessions have focused on behavioral goal-setting geared to moving toward experiences he values but which make him anxious, like raising his hand to speak at Al-Anon meetings or sitting among strangers at a coffee shop, rather than fleeing with coffee to go.

Intuition this hour tells me to hang back and make more space. I refrain from asking him to check in about his weekly goals, though I know this may appear that I've forgotten about them. Still, I hold my tongue, and wait for him to direct the session. For Jerry, my asking a question is a chance for him to hide in the answering it, to put off for a few more blessed moments having to make a choice of his own. Checking in about goals, helpful to a degree, can contain an element of charade. The paradox of avoidance in the garb of therapeutic compliance.

I'm listening, as he narrates a few recent events he's found gratifying, including meaningful conversations with his teen sons. We sit in silence a handful of times between topics, for several minutes. His gaze averted, he sees me peripherally, and he



knows me well enough to know that I'm once again leaving empty space, not directing things, on purpose. He experiences this in part through my body language, which says, I'm here, I'm open, I'm receptive, and I have no goal other than being with you in this moment. Nonverbally, I'm modeling once again patiently sitting with things as they are. He learned this long ago conceptually, as we discussed what mindfulness is, and how it applies in therapy. We've practiced it experientially in countless ways, including in formal meditation practice and on retreat.

To me, these silent moments bristle with richness. There's a palpable tension, between the attention I'm providing, which he needs, and his fear of being re-injured. These silences feel existential, as he lingers between the comfort of compassionate presence and a deeply conditioned impulse to self-protect and avoid intimacy. Decades of intense psychological suffering and longing triangulate in this ritual of two men, two chairs and an oriental rug. The part of him that holds the hope that he can be okay keeps coming back to this ambiguous procedure. The most powerful moments are often without words. The yoga master Swami Kripalu, the namesake of the largest yoga center in the US, the Kripalu Center, frequently emphasized the importance of silent contemplation. Speak only when words are an improvement upon silence, he said. Of course words are the primary medium of most therapy. But they're also the fodder Jerry's rumination uses to keep him distracted, hiding, circling the drain deeper in his own isolated view of himself. There is peril in the use of words as the primary medium. In his meditation practice, he unsurprisingly reports being inundated with thinking. But something possibly quite significant, is evolving in his seeing thoughts as empty, conditioned, not necessarily valid, even in a sense, not-self. One of the unfolding dharma dramas in our work is whether he can come to identify more with the knowing of his thoughts, rather than their content.

I find myself moved by it all, his poignant struggle, our long relationship, the palpable truth that our work has helped him, but in the end he must help himself. I briefly envision an East German in the 80s, halfway over the Berlin Wall, tangled in the barbed wire of oppression. We sit across from each other, me silently beckoning him to climb the wall and escape the authoritarian regime of his thoughts. We've articulated many times the deformed logic of his negative beliefs. How much more needs to be said? I muse that in the stages of change model, he may need more time in preparation, readying himself for the moment he'll step into the present moment in a new way. I mustn't lose hope that such a moment may still come. Part of the preparation may be his continuing to show up, and risk sitting in silences bristling with ambiguity, so physically close to another person.

Much of this crucial uncertainty and the sitting in it together would not be possible across the liquid crystal display of a virtual meeting, it seems to me. In fact, the

distancing effect of the digital platform is a near-perfect medium for Jerry to re-enact his isolation.

The head and shoulders view, face always turned directly forward, doesn't allow the use of body language in this way; nor is it conducive to leaving open-ended silences, waiting for something to naturally emerge. In a virtual meeting, another kind of ambiguity often dominates a silence—that of not knowing what's going on with the technology: Did the audio cut out? Are we in a Wi-Fi glitch? Was something said that I missed, and now, is the other person waiting for my response? The virtual medium now owns the ambiguous, at times draining the fertility of sitting in uncertainty from therapy, I've increasingly noticed as the pandemic procedures drag on.

In a virtual meeting, there's a loss of much of the rich space that surrounds us in the office that can be used so helpfully, to communicate, without words, the holding environment that is a psychotherapy session. I'm here with you, holding you in my awareness, allowing you to be in your process, not rescuing you from ambiguity with more words, but instead communicating that I trust that you're okay, even when you don't know how to express what you feel or what you want. My relaxed face and open, patient body tells you I know this moment is at least just fine, and possibly much more. That sitting in silence in this way contains the seed of a new way of being. With in-person meetings, one can see and even feel the compassion, non-judgment and non-attachment the therapist intends.

For us, homo sapiens, once wounded by members of our own clan, I doubt that any conceptual reassurance, or virtual relationship, can entirely reach the places where trauma and self-doubt are held. We are mammals, and certain things can only be worked through in the embodiment, in the lived experience of risking being within a shared space. The risk of self-revelation in vivo without being shamed may be at times the only thing that can re-wire the reptile brain. In my own various episodes of therapy, a sense of being accepted by other men in group therapy was perhaps the most powerful factor of my claiming a basic self-acceptance and trust of other people. I had to risk the self-reveal to believe they accepted me. And to repair my self-acceptance.

For Jerry, there's something irreplaceable in the act of coming to my office, and being in a space where he's both profoundly uncomfortable and also soothed, and that we're in the space together, cohabitating, however briefly. He comes in each week now and puts his keys, phone and a travel mug tinkling with an iced drink on the floor beside his chair. He claims that little square of rug as his own. I am here, it says, in full body, full vulnerability. We've agreed many times that along with the insight of his birthright—knowing he's fundamentally okay, and safe enough in a messy world, he must live into it, or it's just a reassuring conversation. Knowing this conceptually is only

halfway, not nearly enough. In my role as a therapist, I too find I must live into the work to feel more whole. Although I've reveled in some of the little privileges of online meetings, like wearing shorts and flip-flops in the summer, or meeting from remote locations, I have come to feel that I'm not fully in it if too many sessions are virtual. I can be lazier, which the lazy part of me loves; but it ultimately isn't as satisfying as fully putting myself in the room with someone, nowhere to hide for either of us. The virtual meetings allow too much protection and distance. For the first year or 18 months, it felt like getting away with something, having my cake and eating it too. Connecting and supporting my clients in their explorations and growth, but with some vague quality of, yes, phoning it in.

Another minute or so of silence spreads out around Jerry and me. Finally, I speak with a question about how he's feeling about coming in to the office. As he half-turns his head to address me, I can see the subtlest tremor in his body, an expression of the fear this traumatized man holds, even with his therapist of close to 10 years. I never would have seen it on the screen, this revelation of a raw, preverbal place in him. That tremor speaks volumes about what he carries. One might see it as proof therapy hasn't freed him from his past wounds. Or, as demonstrating his willingness for self-revelation, to risk being close to another person, not allowing fear to block him from connection in the midst of fear.

Therapy is the pursuit of truth—that our fears, self-doubts and moods are mere conditions, not an ultimate reality, and that seeing their flimsiness, emptiness and conditioned nature can free us, and help us claim an essential okay-ness. The process of therapy then is a close examination of what's simply true (a feeling of sadness is present) and what is editorial (narratives that conclude one's life is more globally sad). Does a virtual medium inhibit this perception of truth?

One view says the video conference experience is inevitably a distortion, or a remove from what's true, but that is only one among many distortions great and small that the therapist and their client must unpack together. It seems to me this holds something valid.

Another view says beware of adding a central process or medium that is inherently distorting to a search for truth. Meditation has been described as wiping the dust from the lens, and this would apply in therapy as well. Why then choose a dusty lens like video conference technology? It's inviting distortion. This too seems valid.

His tremor fleeting, Jerry begins to name the ways he's glad to be meeting in person. He says it's clear that it's part of the way out of his cognitive distortions and impulse to avoid.

There's something about being here in person, he says, that forces him to confront his fears and fully show up.

Psychotherapy, and the contemplative practices like yoga and meditation, intend to bring insight and self-understanding through clear apprehension of our internal experiences of thoughts, moods, emotions and urges. Are we as a profession knowingly colluding with a distorting factor that will arguably inhibit our clients' clarity, their inhabiting their full humanity, in favor of convenience? It appears so. It seems equally valid to say the world has changed and that our profession alone can't unchange it. We can hold ourselves with compassion, that we therapists can't magically transcend the ways of the world. Yet it's interesting to consider: What would it be like if psychotherapists insisted on in-person meetings in all but the most pressing circumstances? (As I write this, I find myself not willing to make in-person meetings a requirement. I don't fully understand why.)

It's a grand experiment unfolding, the human engagement with technology. The karma of this is of course incalculable and highly complex. In his fascinating book *Homo Deus*, historian Yuval Harari speculates that we may be evolving further from our humanity, to become, in effect, data processing units, receiving and feeding bits of data into the larger data Cloud. With each photo uploaded of our trip to the beach, we step further from the beach. Reflecting on this, I've come to believe I owe it to my clients to provide informed consent, of the factor of diminishment that video conference meetings represent. In this way, we at the very least name a truth. I've been providing this caveat now for some months, then allowing my clients to choose. Perhaps I'm in the stages of contemplation and preparation, readying myself to take the action, perhaps, to only offer in-person meetings.

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## About the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy

The Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy (IMP) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the education and training of mental health professionals in the integration of mindfulness meditation and psychotherapy.

The vision of IMP is practice-based, and all teaching faculty have extensive personal and professional experience in the practice of mindfulness meditation or other mindfulness practices. Most educational programs offer CE credit for psychologists, social workers, licensed mental health counselors, licensed marital and family therapists, and nurses. Secondary activities of IMP include psychological consultation to meditation centers, clinical supervision, psychotherapy referrals, and networking for interested clinicians.

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