The Meditation Cure
A basic practice of Buddhism turns out to be one of the best ways to deal with the anxieties and appetites bequeathed to us by our evolutionary history

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Much of Buddhism can be boiled down to a bad-news/good-news story. The bad news is that life is full of suffering and we humans are full of illusions. The good news is that these two problems are actually one problem: If we could get rid of our illusions—if we could see the world clearly—our suffering would end.

And there’s more good news: Buddhism offers tools for doing that job. A good example is the type of meditation known as mindfulness meditation, now practiced by millions of people in the U.S. and other places far from Buddhism’s Asian homeland. Mindfulness meditation, Buddhists say, can change our perspective on feelings such as anxiety and rage and thereby sap their power to warp our vision and make us suffer.
These claims—the bad news and the good—are more than two millennia old, but they’re now getting important support from evolutionary psychology, the modern study of how natural selection engineered the human mind. Evolutionary psychology gives Buddhism’s diagnosis of the human predicament a back story. It explains why humans are prone to illusions and to suffering and why the two problems are related. And this explanation can strengthen the Buddhist prescription, adding to the power of mindfulness meditation in particular.

Mindfulness meditation is an exercise in attention. It involves calming the mind—typically by focusing on the breath—and then using the resulting equanimity to observe things with unusual care and clarity. The things observed can include sounds, physical sensations or anything else in the field of awareness. But perhaps most important is the careful observation of feelings, because feelings play such a powerful role in guiding our perceptions, thoughts and behavior.

And here is where an evolutionary perspective can be helpful. Mindfulness calls for a kind of skepticism toward feelings. Rather than automatically following their guidance, you critically inspect them and decide which ones to trust. Evolutionary psychology helps to explain why this skepticism is warranted—why so many human feelings are unreliable guides. We don’t generally think of Darwin and the Buddha as
being on the same wavelength, but in this and other ways their worldviews turn out to harmonize nicely.

The Darwinian account of the human situation, like the Buddhist account, begins with bad news. The process that created us, natural selection, is indifferent to whether we are happy or sad, enlightened or deluded. Ultimately, natural selection only cares about one thing (or, I should say, “cares” — in quotes — since natural selection is just a blind process, not a conscious designer). And that one thing is getting genes into the next generation. Genetically based mental traits — including particular feelings — that in the past contributed to genetic proliferation have flourished, while traits that didn’t have fallen by the wayside. Whether those feelings — and the thoughts and perceptions those feelings shape — give us a true view of reality is, strictly speaking, beside the point. So is whether they make us happy or miserable.

Take anxiety, for example. Evolutionary psychologists consider anxiety to be natural, grounded in our genes. After all, worrying about things can lead you to do something about those things. If you worry that your toddler, who seems to have wandered off somewhere, may get devoured by a beast, you’ll go make sure your toddler is safe — which, not incidentally, means making sure that copies of your genes are safe.
Of course, anxiety is unpleasant. But natural selection doesn’t care about that. It doesn’t even care that some of this unpleasantness will be for naught—that your toddler turned out to be in the hut next door, and the nightmare scenario that for a moment seemed so real was all in your head. Better safe than sorry, from natural selection’s point of view. “False positives” are a feature, not a bug, even though they make you suffer by fostering an illusion.

According to evolutionary psychology, our natural anxieties include social anxieties. The ancestral environment—the hunter-gatherer milieu in which humans evolved—featured lots of social interaction, and this interaction had consequence for a person’s genes. If you had low status in the group and few friends, that cut your chances of spreading your genes, so impressing people mattered.

Similarly, if your offspring didn’t thrive socially, that boded ill for their reproductive prospects, and hence for your genes. So it made sense, in Darwinian terms, for our ancestors to worry about what people thought of them and their offspring.

Here, too, false positives could arise. Our ancestors presumably worried about some things in their social environment that turned out not to be worth worrying about. But we moderns have things even worse. The false-positive problem can be compounded by the fact that anxiety no
longer operates in the environment for which natural selection designed it.

Consider an artifact that has never been found by archaeologists unearthing the remnants of a Paleolithic hunter-gatherer village: PowerPoint. One thing our hunter-gatherer ancestors didn’t do was give presentations to an audience consisting largely of people they didn’t know. Maybe that’s why the prospect of doing this fills some people with overwhelming anxiety: Anxieties designed for a small and fairly intimate social environment get amplified by an environment that is neither.

This doesn’t mean that anxiety about public speaking is worthless. Worrying about your PowerPoint presentation can lead to a better presentation.

But let’s face it: Though this anxiety is sometimes productive, it often isn’t. There are people who, before a presentation, are beset by images of themselves spontaneously vomiting while talking to a crowd—even though, come to think of it, they’ve never spontaneously vomited while talking to a crowd. In a particularly perverse twist on PowerPoint anxiety, I’ve been known to lie awake the night before a big presentation worrying that if I don’t get to sleep I’ll do a bad job the next day.
I defy anyone to argue that this is natural selection’s way of increasing my chances of surviving and reproducing. So too with other modern social anxieties: a sense of dread before going to a cocktail party that, in fact, is unlikely to lead to anything worth dreading; or worrying about how your child is doing at her first slumber party, something you’re powerless to influence. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors didn’t have to navigate roomfuls of people they had never met, or send their children off to sleep in homes they had never seen—and that, presumably, is why these occasions can bring powerful yet typically unproductive anxiety.

This mismatch between our evolved nature and the environment in which we find ourselves isn’t just a modern phenomenon. For thousands of years, there have been social environments that weren’t the ones people were designed for. The Buddha was born to a royal family, which means that he lived in a society with clusters of population much bigger than a hunter-gatherer village. And there is evidence that people were being called on to speak before large audiences and that something like PowerPoint anxiety had taken shape. In one discourse, the Buddha’s list of common fears included the “fear of embarrassment in assemblies.”

That people were, even in the Buddha’s day, experiencing an uncomfortable mismatch between the environment their feelings were engineered for and the environment in which they found themselves may help to explain Buddhism’s early emphasis on meditative practice. The
meditation that is described in ancient texts would have made people more aware of their feelings—in a sense more objectively aware of them—and so less reflexively governed by them. This remains a central goal of mindfulness meditation today.

And it can work. I have a daily meditation practice—periodically recharged by silent meditation retreats of a week or more—and I have more than once used meditation to deal with intense anxiety. In the middle of the night before a big talk, I have even sat up in bed, meditated, and gotten to a point where I viewed a knot of anxiety with such calm objectivity that it might as well have been a piece of abstract art I was contemplating in a museum. It entirely lost its grip on me, after which it disappeared. Perhaps Buddhists more than two millennia ago had much the same experience when meditating on “fear of speaking in assemblies.”

There is no doubt, however, that the modern environment surpasses the Buddha’s environment in its power to warp our feelings about, hence our perception of, the world. Consider powdered sugar doughnuts.

I have warm feelings toward them—so warm that, if I were guided only by my feelings, I would eat them for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and between-meal snacks. Yet I’m told that eating that many doughnuts
would be bad for me—that my feeling of attraction to powdered-sugar doughnuts is not to be trusted. This is hard news to take.

How could natural selection let something like this happen—give me feelings that don’t even do a good job of taking care of the body containing my genes? Well, natural selection designed our feelings for an environment with no junk food, an environment in which the sweetest thing available was fruit. So a sweet tooth, and the feelings it inspires, served us well. But in the modern world, which features the achievement of culinary science known as “empty calories,” these feelings become misleading.

Or, I should say, more misleading. Fundamental to Buddhism is the idea that craving in general—tanha, as it’s called in ancient texts—is inherently misleading. Regardless of what we thirst after—junk food, healthful food, sex—the thirst, the tanha, fosters an illusion of enduring gratification. When I see anything tasty, I imagine how good it will taste, not how that satisfaction will inevitably fade, leading to the desire for more.

This was one of the Buddha’s main messages: that the pleasures we seek evaporate quickly and leave us thirsting for more. We spend our time looking for the next gratifying thing—the next doughnut, the next sexual encounter, the next status-enhancing promotion, the next online
purchase. But the thrill always fades, and it always leaves us wanting more. The old Rolling Stones lyric “I can’t get no satisfaction” is, according to Buddhism, the human condition. Though the Buddha is famous for asserting that life is full of suffering, some scholars say that’s an incomplete rendering of his message and that the word translated as “suffering,” dukkha, could be translated as “unsatisfactoriness.”

From natural selection’s point of view, dooming an animal to relentlessly recurring unsatisfactoriness is a wonderful idea. After all, if pleasure didn’t subside, we’d never seek it again. Our first meal would be our last, because hunger would never return. So too with sex: a single act of intercourse, and then a lifetime of lying there basking in the afterglow. That’s no way to get lots of genes into the next generation! Contentment is nice while it lasts, but it evaporates by design.

Much in the modern world—from junk food to pornography to nicotine to the Facebook algorithm that governs your news feed—has been engineered to intensify tanha, our unquenchable desire for more.

What to do? One approach is to meditate: Observe particular cravings mindfully, thus weakening them. This is challenging—more challenging than meditating on anxiety, I’d say—but there’s evidence that it can work. A study involving 88 smokers, published in the journal Drug and Alcohol Dependence in 2011, found that this kind of mindfulness
training more effectively treated nicotine addiction than the American Lung Association’s Freedom From Smoking program, which offers group counseling and a menu of therapies such as nicotine patches.

Regular mindfulness meditation can also undermine craving in a more general way. It can lessen the urgency of finding the next big thing by deepening your appreciation of things that you already have.

Buddhism’s list of unfortunate human illusions is long. It includes misconceptions about the “self” that we think of as being at our core and misconceptions about the nature of the things that we see in the world, including other humans. And many of these illusions can plausibly be explained as having been implanted in us by natural selection to serve its agenda—an agenda that doesn’t put a priority on seeing the world as it actually is or on finding lasting happiness in the world that we do see.

It is a tribute to Buddhism that it sized up the human predicament more than two millennia before science got around to discovering the origins of that predicament. But it would be unlike the Buddha to boast about this. If he were around today, he might instead thank Darwin for the corroboration, for explaining how humans wound up being prone to illusion and to attendant suffering. And if Darwin were around today, and joined the mindfulness meditation movement, he might thank the Buddha for coming up with a way to address the problem.
This essay is adapted from Mr. Wright’s new book, “Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment,” which will be published by Simon & Schuster on Aug. 8. His previous books include “The Evolution of God,” “Nonzero” and “The Moral Animal.”