

The Grass-is-Greener Syndrome: Challenges to Being Present
by Abby Seixas

Have you ever had an experience like this: you might be walking on a beautiful wooded trail, or watching a sunset over water, or relaxing with good friends at the end of a day's work; you are doing something at least mildly enjoyable or pleasant, and you begin to think about the last time you did something like this, or about what you're going to do when you get home, or that your cat needs her toenails cut... It's easy to understand the desire to exit the present moment in the midst of a difficult life situation or while experiencing physical or emotional pain. But what about when your mind takes you away from a present moment that is perfectly agreeable, in favor of a past or future moment that presumably either was or will be better or more important than *this* moment?

This tendency for the mind to roam here and there and away from the moment is simply what minds do. But there is also an assumption implicit in the pull toward the past or future and away from the present, that some *other* time must be more important than this moment. This underlying belief, that the grass is always greener on the other side of here-and-now, effectively blocks our ability to show up in *this* moment.

When I speak about presence in my groups, I use a cartoon by Gahan Wilson that shows two monks sitting side by side. The older, presumably wiser one, is saying to the younger monk, who has a look of dismay on his face, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

It seems we all, Zen monks included, tend to ignore the present as we look toward the next best thing, or perhaps try to re-live the last good thing. I have noticed an amusing pattern in my own mind that reminds me of the young monk. I meditate most mornings. Meditation, for me, is a helpful way to practice presence. My mind goes on its little trips of planning, remembering, worrying and so on. When I become aware that I'm rehearsing a conversation I'll be having with a colleague later, or replaying--again--the last phone call with my daughter, I bring myself gently back, as best as I can, to simple awareness of my breath, my body, here, now. Recently, I noticed the irony of one of my little recurring mind trips. While meditating, I imagine how calm and mindful I will be when I get up from the cushion. I see myself slowly walking into the kitchen, fully present, feeling the floor under my feet with each step, feeling my whole body moving through space, taking in the colors and shapes of the house with my eyes as I mindfully walk from one room to the other. It's a lovely fantasy, but I chuckled to myself when I realized that there I was meditating with no other intention than to be present, and my mind was off in the future imagining how present I was *going to be!* The grass-is-greener syndrome... Thinking *about* being present in the moment is still *thinking*, not presence.

When I realize I'm on automatic pilot, or my mind says the grass is greener "there, then" while my body is "here,now," it helps me to remember that humans have been working with these habits of mind for centuries. It helps me

soften toward myself and smile inwardly at my chattering mind. And sometimes, it helps me slow down and wake up to this very moment.