

Mindfulness – An Introduction

Gena Fawns

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the state of being aware of present-moment experience (Kabat-Zinn 1990). It can be challenging to maintain present-moment awareness for any length of time, even though there are many mental and physical benefits to learning how to do so (Hanson 2009, Gawler 1987/2002).

The Eastern spiritual tradition of Buddhism has accumulated a large body of practical and theoretical knowledge about mindfulness, as a method of self-healing, a way to understand life and develop wisdom, and a path to enlightenment (Goldstein 1993). According to Gunaratana (1991), mindfulness is an investigatory method that allows us to perceive the three deepest truths of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness (p149).

What is meditation?

Buddhism teaches that meditation is the primary tool with which we can develop our capacity for mindfulness. Quite apart from any spiritual goal or purpose, mindfulness offers a self-help practice for managing difficult experiences, particularly accumulated stress and negative thoughts and feelings.

Observing present-moment experience allows us to identify the components of our reactions to stressful events. This recognition helps us learn that we have more choices than the habitual ones we employ in response to our experiences. It also shows that there are ways to release negative reactions once they have occurred, rather than let them accumulate as stress and negativity (Tulku 1987/2007).

Meditation offers a range of methods with which to cultivate awareness of our inner experience. It emphasises particular attitudes and behaviours that have been found to help people understand what is happening in their inner landscape.

Meditation has been adopted by many health professionals in the West, as a reliable means of reducing the suffering and distress associated with illnesses such as cancer (Gawler 1987/2002), depression (Segal, Williams & Teasdale 2013), and chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn 1990). A growing number of studies have demonstrated the usefulness of mindfulness-

based programs to reduce stress and improve well-being, and in the last twenty years, their popularity has grown dramatically.

Some Westerners explore meditation as a spiritual practice, embedded in the teachings of Buddhism, while others prefer the secular version of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) for health and well-being, without the overtly spiritual component. For me, meditation is primarily a self-help tool that enables me to release negativity and improve my mood and state of being. It allows me to process my inner experience and develop a more peaceful and joyful state of consciousness.

When focused on the breath, my mind connects to a more embodied experience of myself: I feel my whole body, from the inside, and am aware of subtle sensations of energy and aliveness within. This changes my perspective on 'me', and allows my thoughts to recede and become part of the whole. The practice of concentrating on the breath trains my mind, over time, to observe thoughts and feelings that arise and let them pass by.

I see meditation as a way to 'cleanse' my system of accumulated stress and negativity, akin to washing my clothes when they get dirty. Through repeated practice, I am now able to access a deep ocean of calm and joy that provides me with nourishment and healing.

The 'price' to be paid by anyone wishing to access this peaceful, expansive level of consciousness is to let go of the various constrictive thoughts and feelings that have clogged up our consciousness. Through this process, we learn what is important in life and what is really 'me' and 'not me'. Repeated practice will gradually train us to be less attached to our needs and attitudes, which can lead to changes in our everyday approach to life.

Mindfulness of what?

In mindfulness, we focus attention on the whole range of inner experience, including body sensations, breathing, feelings, sense impressions, thoughts, emotions, and awareness of the present moment. The four main foci of mindfulness practice are: (1) the body (including the breath and physical sensations); (2) the hedonic or feeling tone (whether sensations are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral); (3) the various mind-states (thoughts, beliefs, stories, images, etc.); and (4) all phenomena occurring in the present moment (OpenGround 2012).

The body

In my experience, focusing on the breath and body has been a powerful way to shift my awareness beneath my thinking. Following the breath has a calming effect on my mind and nervous system. I imagine the breath as a fine energy flowing through and beyond my whole body. This brings a pleasant sensation of relaxation and vitality.

As well as the breath, I focus on my body and fine-tuning my posture. This is a core practice in Kum Nye Tibetan Yoga called 'Sitting in the Seven Gestures' (Tulku 1979/2007). The Seven Gestures describes a balanced and relaxed position for the legs, pelvis, spine, neck, arms, jaw and eyes. In Kum Nye, the eyes are closed or half-closed, the jaw is soft, the mouth slightly open and the tongue lightly touches the back of the upper teeth. Breathing is through nose and mouth, to balance the energy flowing through mind and body.

In Kum Nye Relaxation, the key concepts are Kum (the body, physical and energetic) and Nye (the flow of energy and feeling). These two elements also correspond to stillness/calm, and vitality/joy, which are blended in dynamic balance in the moving and sitting practices of Kum Nye (Tulku 1978/2007).

Hedonic tone

The second focus in mindfulness is awareness of feelings or hedonic tone. Hedonic tone is one type of feeling, but there are also sensory feelings (eg, hot, cold), emotions (eg, sad, anxious), and other subtle feelings which may be 'sensed' but not easily named (eg, optimism, trust). All feelings and sensations are observed in our awareness of moment-to-moment experience.

Hedonic tone is defined as our tendency to find experiences pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. We are encouraged in meditation to enquire into the exact nature of our pain, discomfort and negativity, and thus learn more about the causes of our suffering. Buddhism teaches that all suffering is the result of desire, aversion or ignorance within ourselves (Thera 1954/1996).

Many writers discuss how internal reactions exacerbate our suffering; in MBSR these reactions are labelled the 'second arrow' (OpenGround 2012). Students in time can learn to distinguish the triggering event from the cascade of reactions that follow, including anger, resentment, fear and resistance. This leads to empowerment through finding the choice to let go of the second and subsequent arrows, and try accepting the unpleasant experience as it is.

Psychology and neuroscience support the view that negative thoughts and feelings will flow through us naturally if we do not block or resist them (Siegel 1999). Unfortunately, traumatic experiences that overwhelm the nervous system with fear, loss or pain often lead to primitive survival responses, which lock the trauma inside the body-mind, but out of awareness (Schoore 2003). However, if the experience can be felt and accepted, either by sharing with a caring other, or providing a caring, supportive attitude to oneself (Segal et al 2013), then it can be released and reintegrated into consciousness.

Hence, learning to be mindful of our hedonic tone, in both meditation and life, promotes the gradual strengthening of our capacity to bear unpleasantness and remain in touch with a sense of peace and equanimity. This promotes resilience and well-being, and highlights one of the core lessons of mindfulness: that focusing on changing oneself, rather than external conditions, can open a new dimension of freedom within the self (Goldstein 1993).

For a long time, I found the practice of accepting negative emotions and physical pains quite a challenge. It is only in recent years that I have been able to look less at changing my situation and more within myself for whatever may be missing. Starting daily meditation, eighteen months ago, has provided much growth in this direction.

Mind-states

The third foundation of mindfulness is to focus on the various mind-states that arise: thoughts, memories, images, stories, etc. Noticing this stream of consciousness is extremely useful to show us the passing nature of these phenomena, and cultivate the understanding that 'I am not my thoughts'. Students learn to notice thoughts and return their focus to the breath, sometimes labelling them to maintain a degree of separation (Gunaratana 1991).

Mindful awareness of thought processes can shed light on the kinds of issues that preoccupy us. Recently, on a silent retreat, I noticed my mind was busily engaged in judging myself and others, and mentally arguing with these imagined judgements of myself, over the most trivial of matters. I noticed I felt embattled, unhappy and insecure in the midst of this dialogue.

I began to reflect on the needs that lay behind my thoughts, and noticed many excuses and justifications in my mind, which seemed to flow from a wish to have others understand and accept me as I am. I realised this is probably what others want, as well; we are all seeking acceptance and understanding! After this realisation, the thoughts faded and my mind became more open and compassionate.

Present-moment awareness

The fourth focus of mindfulness is to be aware of all phenomena arising in the present moment. This practice integrates the various strands of experience into one ever-changing flow. It is rewarding to become aware of multiple dimensions at once, particularly the whole body and the different sensations within. It is paradoxical that the longer we sit in stillness, the more plentiful are the subtle phenomena we can notice in our inner landscape and the world around us.

Almost identical to MBSR's four foci of awareness are the five 'aggregates' of mindfulness as taught by Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn (1976). He recommends meditating upon (1) the physical body; (2) feelings; (3) perceptions; (4) mental functioning; and (5) consciousness. This last category "contains all the others and is the basis of their existence" (p46).

Hahn states that contemplating these five objects of awareness will help us understand the interdependence and impermanence of all phenomena, and see that no 'thing' exists separately from the mind that perceives it. He believes the breath is an ideal focus for mindfulness, because: "Breath is aligned to both body and mind and it alone is the tool which can bring them both together, illuminating both and bringing both peace and calm" (p23). In my experience, the breath has certainly been the most stabilising and fruitful focus for my practice, along with the body and all that I notice occurring there.

How do we meditate?

In mindfulness, we are asked to pay moment-to-moment attention to our experience, using certain helpful behaviours and attitudes. The helpful behaviours or techniques we learn are: breathing, stillness, paying attention, movement, reflection, regular practice, and self-care in daily life (OpenGround 2012). The helpful attitudes are: acceptance, kindness, non-judgement, compassion, care, patience and love. These practices and attitudes are what is taught and modelled in beginners' courses in mindfulness (McCown, Reibel & Micozzi 2011).

Helpful practices

The basic activity of mindfulness is to sit in stillness and silence, and observe. The traditional sitting posture is cross-legged on a cushion, with the back straight and the hands resting on the knees. One may also kneel on a stool or sit on a chair. The degree of strictness in sitting posture will vary: some schools allow lying down or leaning against a wall; others do not. In MBSR, the Buddhist Insight tradition is followed, wherein meditation is done sitting, walking, standing and lying down (Thera 1954/1996).

Students will vary in terms of their awareness of their body, feelings, emotions and thoughts. In Westerners, thinking tends to dominate consciousness, and it may be quite threatening for some to begin feeling more. Hence the practices aim to introduce students gradually and gently to how they feel at the physical and emotional levels. The body scan is one example of a safe introduction to discovering feelings in the body. Another is gentle stretching, with an emphasis on attunement and exploration, rather than performance.

Newcomers to mindfulness benefit from a gradual process of acclimatising to the demands of sitting without back support for extended periods. In fact, the process of learning how to maintain balance and comfort in our posture is a key part of learning about our body and inner world. In Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Segal et al (2013) recommend “teaching people to explore how they might have a different relationship not only to thoughts but *also* to feelings, body sensations, and impulses to act, that is, to the whole body-mind state” (p55).

Helpful attitudes

Equally or more important than the practices are the attitudes we need to bring to our experience, to help cultivate the expanded awareness and equanimity which is possible (McCown et al 2011). While the spiritual beliefs of Buddhism are not necessary to learning mindfulness, the attitudes of acceptance, compassion and loving-kindness definitely are (Goldstein 1993).

When we attempt to bring kindness and care to our own experience, particularly our suffering and negativity, we must firstly find these qualities within ourselves, and secondly, bring them into contact with our negative states. Thus, we learn that it is within our power to create and use positive attitudes to soothe ourselves. Psychotherapists have recognised that learning to self-soothe is a key tool in emotional regulation (Greenberg 2002). In mindfulness, we see it has been a part of Buddhist wisdom for centuries.

In addition, bringing acceptance and compassion to ourselves is a first step towards bringing these attitudes to others, which helps cultivate more empathic and peaceful relationships (Segal et al 2013). This, combined with learning to let go of judgement towards ourselves and others, enables us to see through the meanings our minds have constructed in response to situations, which restrict and colour our attitudes in unhelpful ways.

The experiential practice of mindfulness offers a way to cultivate wisdom, understanding and compassion, by examining and transforming the elements of experience as they arise in the present moment. At times, this may be challenging, because we must enquire into the defences and survival patterns that have made up our identity. However, with continued practice it is possible to access an ever-expanding sense of freedom, joy and peace.

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