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Mindfulness now

R.J. Chisholm*

Psychotherapist, Buddhist Practitioner, Canterbury and East Kent, UK

Mindfulness is now being touted as an all-purpose solution for virtually any problem that is set before it. But is it possible that something essential might be lost when it is presented as nothing more than an effective method of stress reduction? According to Buddhism, mindfulness should be linked to morality and wisdom in order to realize its benefits fully. But following the example of Kabat-Zinn, psychotherapy may have much to gain by using it as a *secular* practice.

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A modern panacea?

As a psychotherapist who has practised Buddhist meditation for the better part of 30 years, I find it remarkable that mindfulness is now being widely touted almost as a magical technique that will solve virtually any problem it is presented with. This unexpected development follows from the seminal work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990), a clinical scientist and dedicated practitioner of Zen who almost 40 years ago had realized that mindfulness could be an effective way of treating stress. Before he could act on his insight, Kabat-Zinn faced an obstacle, which was the association of mindfulness with Buddhism. But once he received the advice to divest the practice of its religious trappings, he was able to develop a secular programme of mindfulness that succeeded in reducing stress in the medical patients he first dealt with, without promoting any spiritual values. His innovation has been so successful that mindfulness is now being practised in a variety of secular settings that not even Kabat-Zinn would have imagined. There are now reports of athletes, bankers, educators, politicians and even soldiers using mindfulness to reduce stress in order to improve their performance in their various professional endeavours. Clearly, mindfulness has travelled a long distance away from the monastic setting in which it was first developed and has usually been practised – so much so that we may wonder what will become of it, as it finds new applications in the secular world. My suspicion is that much of the current interest in mindfulness is likely to fade, not because it doesn't always 'work', but because when it does, it often refuses to remain harnessed to the purpose that it was meant to serve. I also believe that secular mindfulness will have a lasting future, not so much in corporate personal development seminars, perhaps, but certainly in psychotherapy where cultivating self-awareness in the client has always been a primary interest.

But what, exactly, is mindfulness, and what makes it so versatile for such a wide variety of interests?

*Email: rj.chisholm55@gmail.com

Stealth Buddhism

A good place to begin answering these questions is by reading the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, which should always have the first word on mindfulness. Reputedly based on oral teachings of the Buddha himself, there are actually two different versions of this teaching in the oldest body of canonical texts in Buddhism, the Pali Canon, both of them saying essentially the same thing. The text is a manual of instruction for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the suffering of destruction and grief, for reaching the right path, for the attainment of Nibbāna [Nirvana] (Thera, 1998). In spite of these lofty aims, the text makes for dry reading, as it contains such dull instructions as the following:

> Mindful, [the monk] breathes in, and mindful, he breathes out. He, thinking 'I breathe in long' he understands when he is breathing in long; or, thinking 'I breathe out long' he understands when he is breathing out long; or thinking 'I breathe in short' he understands when he is breathing in short; or thinking 'I breathe out short' he understands when he is breathing out short. (ibid.)

Yet in its simplicity and its narrowness of reference, the *Satipatthana Sutta* conveys the essence of mindfulness. The cultivation and refinement of attention, without expectation or self-interest, is what permits the meditator to see things as they really are and experience reality with pristine awareness.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to suppose that the *Satipatthana Sutta* presents mindfulness as nothing more than the cultivation of present-moment awareness as an end in itself. Nor is mindfulness confined to such neutral concerns as the length of the breath. An entire section of the text is devoted to contemplating the body as a vile object of disgust, which contains such revolting substances as phlegm, faeces and bile. The point of this and other similar exercises in the sutta is to deprive the body of any erotic attraction, and rid the meditator of attachment to the body and physical pleasure. Such contemplations are clearly at odds with contemporary psychology which regards the ability to experience sexual pleasure as a sign of robust mental health. Indeed, secular mindfulness is now even being used for sex therapy, which is an application that early Buddhists would surely have found heretical. For mindfulness in Buddhism not only means clear awareness; it also means the recollection of the Buddha's teaching in contemplating all phenomena.

Certainly, for early Buddhists, merely reducing stress and improving concentration would never be confused for escaping samsara, the round of rebirth. By contrast, contemporary secular mindfulness practitioners tend to view mindfulness as a technique that will sharpen their competitive edge for their worldly endeavours, including making love, money and war, all of which the Buddha expressly condemned as *akusala karma*, or unskilful activities.

Yet, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, most contemporary Buddhists tend to have a favourable view of mindfulness being used for secular purposes. I once had occasion to ask Ajahn Amaro, the abbot of Amaravati Buddhist monastery in Hertfordshire, what he thought of secular mindfulness. 'Stealth Buddhism', he replied with a broad smile. The reasoning behind Amaro's approval, I suspect, is that he believes that by achieving a degree of tranquillity through detached self-observation, any practitioner of mindfulness, even those who are not Buddhists, will

be making a step towards a more spiritual life, if not necessarily on the Buddhist path. He might be right, but this is not what secular mindfulness practitioners seem to think, at all.

Mindfulness or effectiveness?

The Mind Fitness Training Institute (MFTI) in suburban Washington, DC, for example, specializes in offering mindfulness training to serve such decidedly non-spiritual interest groups as members of the military forces, law enforcement officers, intelligence analysts and undercover agents, to name only four. The MFTI website describes the objectives of its training as maximizing personal performance for organizational effectiveness, but it says nothing about spiritual liberation. And far from basing itself on the insights of the Buddha, MFTI proudly declares that it draws on 'cutting-edge neuroscience and stress and trauma research … drawing on thirty years of empirical research about the efficacy of mindfulness training' (http://www.mind-fitness-training.org). Clearly, MFTI thinks that secular mindfulness works; but towards what end?

Self or no-self?

The idea that any meditation practice will be strongly conditioned by the metaphysical as well as the practical views of the meditator has always been taken for granted in Buddhism, Hinduism and virtually every other Eastern religion. Yet the belief of secular mindfulness appears to be that any consideration of ultimate truth is unnecessary if, indeed, it is not actually a hindrance to maximizing the concentration and performance of the meditator in his or her worldly pursuits. At this point, the difference between religious and secular mindfulness would seem to be irreconcilable. But for psychotherapy, at least, there may be good reason to examine the metaphysical foundations of mindfulness as a Buddhist spiritual practice, even though psychotherapy has always been determinedly secular, and is usually careful to avoid any association with religion. For as its name indicates, psychotherapy regards itself as more akin to medicine, or healing, than to religion, as it sees its function as more recuperative than redemptive. Even so, there is one matter upon which the interests of Buddhism and psychotherapy converge: the nature of the self, and what it is that determines human experience. To be sure, psychotherapy and Buddhism regard the self from very different perspectives and for quite different purposes. Yet both are concerned with the self as the subject of any potential experience. What is remarkable about Buddhism is that it regards the self as fundamentally empty, indeed as no self at all. So what could such a self-negating idea have to offer to psychotherapy?

The Buddhist doctrine of no-self often baffles people when they first encounter the idea. After all, if there is no self then who is supposed to realize it? Some of the mystery appears to vanish, once it is understood that impermanence is the principle that underpins the idea of no-self. Moreover, in a further development of this doctrine, it is the craving for permanence that gives rise to suffering. Together, these three interlocking principles of impermanence, suffering and no-self (in Pali: *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*) comprise what Buddhism calls the Three Marks of Existence, which stand as a neat summary of Buddhist metaphysics. But the paradox of no-self

that appears to be solved by this formula returns with a vengeance when Buddhism goes on to assert that it is possible to realize the truth of no-self through direct self-observation. Although this paradox may be considered suitable for higher spiritual contemplation, it might seem too far removed from the grinding realities of the everyday world to be of any practical use. But no-self demonstrates its relevance to psychotherapy once it is realized that the self experience is constituted by the attachments that the self maintains.

According to Buddhism, seeing through one's attachments makes it possible to drop them, even to the point of realizing no-self. For psychotherapy, the idea of no-self implies that by bringing the client's attachments to mindful awareness, freeing them of their compulsive character becomes possible too. But teaching the techniques of mindfulness is not always useful for psychotherapy, if indeed it is not actually counterproductive. Although Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) sometimes teaches mindfulness techniques to beneficial effect, psychotherapy is obliged to work less didactically. For psychotherapy is fundamentally about developing a relationship between the client and the therapist through which the client may come to see and interpret his experience with greater freedom and insight. Mindfulness in psychotherapy, then, is less a matter of teaching any technique than it is about the therapist exemplifying a mindful attitude, and creating a mindful space for the client to make an examination of both self and world. The question is, how?

Psychotherapy has always recognized the importance of establishing a reflective space for the client. Freud himself spoke of the therapist cultivating 'evenly suspended attention' (Freud, 1911, p. 115) in order to remain open to unexpected developments in the therapeutic process. But therapeutic mindfulness implies something more than reaching an advantageous position for analysis. By adopting an attitude of mindful attention, the therapist encourages the client to become open to finding possibilities that his life may hold, but which may be hidden by the blinders of mindless habit. Reaching such a deep and usually unspoken understanding goes beyond the therapist showing empathic understanding of the client. It is at least as much a matter of both client and therapist arriving at a shared perspective based in sympathy and mutual trust. Such mindfulness, jointly attained and mutually shared, allows for the communication of possibilities before those possibilities become surrendered to fixed patterns of belief and action. Using mindfulness in this way may not only defuse a pathological process; it can also lead to the discovery of a spaciousness and ease of being that brings about both self-acceptance and self-responsibility in the client. But there is no magic at work here. Mindfulness in psychotherapy requires patient and determined effort by both therapist and client. The same, of course, can be said about any other type of psychotherapy, as well as mindfulness for meditation.

However, Buddhist meditation usually has a goal or desired outcome – expressed variously as release from suffering, nirvana, enlightenment and so forth – which takes authority from the Buddha's understanding of reality. Psychotherapy, by contrast, must have lesser aims and must work more within the client's frame of reference rather than with the Buddha's metaphysical vision. Moreover, psychotherapy must never be used to proselytize, no matter how psychologically liberating the therapist may believe his spiritual beliefs are.

Clearly, then, freeing mindfulness of its religious trappings increases its therapeutic utility, as Kabat-Zinn realized years ago. But does this mean that mindfulness

can be used for anything and still offer deep insight into the self? Buddhism would say 'no', and has always insisted that mindfulness must be linked to morality and wisdom in order to realize its benefits fully. But perhaps Ajahn Amaro has a point. Perhaps taking up mindfulness for any purpose represents an introspective turn that may take the meditator in a better direction. Certainly, psychotherapy should always be prepared to discover new paths for the client to take. So perhaps travelling a new path mindfully may improve the possibilities of therapy, even if it doesn't happen to follow the Buddhist way. But what can the destination of mindful psychotherapy ultimately be? Perhaps we are just beginning to find out.

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Notes on contributor

Bob Chisholm offers counselling and psychotherapy in Canterbury and east Kent. He blogs regularly on www.bobchisholmcounselling.com.

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