



Mindfulness Is Full Engagement

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Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) has provided a widely accepted definition of mindfulness as a form of nonjudgmental, purposeful attention in the present moment. This definition, while helpful, can be somewhat limiting. In this article we discuss various aspects of mindfulness we feel require more nuanced consideration. Attention is not the same as awareness, and its cultivation can become distorted into a pursuit of vigilant alertness directed toward the objects of attention rather than a more fully engaged style of participant-observation. The emphasis on purposefulness in mindfulness can lead to self-centered cultivation of a skill set rather than the mutual co-arising of experience that is central to psychotherapy. Furthermore, “in the present moment” can constrain practitioners to a reified notion of time that does not fully acknowledge its subjective (and intersubjective) qualities. To think we understand what mindfulness “is” substitutes mastery for mystery and, in the process, limits its potential for radical transformation. Mindfulness heals by virtue of its being ultimately ungraspable—a joyful dance instead of a therapeutic technique. Mindfulness is not a skill; it is a gate.

Keywords: mindfulness, attention, awareness, time, intersubjectivity, meditation

As clinical and neuropsychologists and mindfulness and meditation teachers, we have had many conversations between ourselves and with colleagues, practitioners, and lay people about various aspects of mindfulness. In this article, we share some reflections on mindfulness that developed and evolved over many silent sittings, drinking of cups of tea (and wine), or just thinking out aloud to ourselves and to each other. These are divided into various themes in a form of questions and answers with added commentaries and discussion on the musings. For convenience and accessibility, we have identified the questions in bold italics. We hope our inquiry provides a source of reflection for others’ ongoing explorations.

Editor’s Note. My brief to contributors was “Bring your own personal voice and style of writing to your articles.” It is exciting and a delight to find that in this article, Rosenbaum and Bohart have invited readers into their “living rooms” and “cushions” to partake of their reflections and musings analogous to the tradition of Zen Buddhism of sharing personal experiences and insights through “questions and answers.”—Belinda Siew Luan Khong

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What Is Mindfulness?

What is mindfulness? I like the definition my friend Alan Senauke offers: “One takes the scattered pieces of actions or awareness and re-collects them in wholeness” (Senauke, 2016, p. 70). My own definition of mindfulness is “complete engagement of body-and-mind.”

“I thought mindfulness was ‘paying attention, on purpose, nonjudgmentally, in the present moment.’” That definition was popularized by Jon Kabat-Zinn for his program of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). He intentionally removed Buddhist terms and concepts from mindfulness as taught in MBSR, wanting to keep it secular so it would not alienate people who might be put off by any religious or spiritual roots. This removal has some advantages, but it also loses something in translation. The definition provides a good working model for MBSR, but each element of the definition also has some limitations and problems.

Mindfulness, Attention, and Awareness

“Surely mindfulness is about paying attention—though I notice neither of the definitions you suggested included attention.” The problem with saying mindfulness is about paying attention is that everyone assumes they know what “attention” is. As a neuropsychologist, if you ask me to assess a patient’s capacity for attention after, say, a head injury, I have many different tests I might use to assess vigilance, sustained attention, divided attention, and so forth.

To use a metaphor, if you think of attention as a kind of beam of light we shine on objects, then the beam can be narrow or wide, bright or dim. The beam can be moving or remain on one area (Wachtel, 1967). Now we have a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ matrix for a minimum of eight dimensions of attention. Furthermore, visual attention functions differently from auditory attention, tactile attention, and so forth. Taking the five sense attributes multiplied by the eight dimensions, we now have 40 kinds of attention. That is not even taking into account how attention varies continuously—the beam is not bright *or* dim, there are many gradations. In addition, it is rare to only use single sensory channels; for example, we usually rely on visual *and* auditory attention when we are listening to a speaker. We have to take the permutations of combining five sense modalities into account. This also does not reflect the fact that attention can be recursive; we can attend to how we attend. In fact, this latter kind of attention is crucial to traditional Buddhist mindfulness training.

This is not just theoretical. You might try looking at an object with a sharp, focused gaze, then soften your eyes so that your peripheral vision widens and you see more of the room. You will probably feel different with a sharp focus than with a relaxed one. There are significant consequences to the modalities of attention we engage in. For example, as we get older, our hearing gets worse, so we rely more on visual attention. If you are sitting across from someone, you might have no trouble taking in what they say, but if they are facing away from you or in another room, you have to struggle. It is common for an older person to worry their spouse is becoming demented because “they don’t remember what I tell them.” Often it is not dementia; the problem is the conversation is not taking place face to face, so the information never got well-encoded in the first place.

Think of what you need to do in order to drive “mindfully.” Yes, you want to focus on what is in front of you, but you also want to periodically scan a wider field to be aware of who is behind you and in the lanes on either side of you. To do that, you need to

disengage attention from what is in front of you. It is also a good idea to be alert to any strange sounds the engine makes and pull over if you hear any grinding noises. If you become sleepy, you need to stop and take a rest or ask someone else to drive, but to do that, you need to be aware of how alert you are. Awareness is not the same as attention.

“What do you mean, awareness is not the same as attention?” There is a great deal of cognitive science that demonstrates we are affected by many things in our environment even when we are not paying attention to them. When we are in a warm environment, we rate our personal relationships as more intimate—“warmer”—than when we are in a cool room or if we are holding a cold drink (IJzerman & Semin, 2009; Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008). Behavioral economists (Kahneman, 2011) have shown that when there is a contributions jar behind the coffee pot in a break room, people will put more money into the jar if there is a picture behind it with a human face eyeing them—even though the coffee drinkers, on questioning, cannot remember what the picture was (or even whether it was there).

Granted, we can get into language problems and semantic arguments about whether people were “aware” of what was influencing them if they were not “conscious” of them. Certainly if no part of the organism were “aware” of the temperature or the picture, it could not influence them. The fact that we respond to things we are not paying attention indicates awareness is not just a matter of conscious or not-conscious, as if awareness is an on-off binary phenomenon. There are certainly *qualities* to awareness; when you are pleasantly warm, there is a pleasant “feel” you may not notice but on some level are aware of.

This means awareness is not so much paying attention *to* something separate from you or being cognizant *of* some object or idea; rather, awareness is a matter of how you harmonize *with* the reality of your immediate experience. This aspect of harmonizing with all being is crucial to Buddhist mindfulness but is omitted from the popular definition. Art wrote a poem to express this, and in our working on it together, our poem arrived as follows:

It's not a matter of emptying or not emptying.
 It's not a matter of awake or asleep, alert or fuzzy.
 It is a letting be, a letting in.
 As if I am a room and I am contemplating what's in it -
 What passes through, the door opening,
 breezes wafting, people passing in and out.
 Deer come in, graze, startle, bolt:
 storms come in to blow themselves out.
 I'm not *in* the room. . . . just that I am we are the room is.
 A matter of *thereness*, a smidge of *crossing-with*
 things being things being

Mindfulness and Psychotherapy

“Even so, intention is important, isn't it? So paying attention on purpose must be an important part of mindfulness.” Yes and no. This gets us into two issues: goal directness and “who” is the agent in mindfulness. Many psychologists these days have a positivist bias. They have learned that if you want to accomplish something, it helps to set clear goals. While this is true, it's also limiting; you may get to your goal but discover it's not what you thought it would be and does not end up satisfying your needs—especially since your needs may have changed in the process of reaching your goal.

Being goal directed has the virtue of narrowing your field of effort. That very narrowing, though, can get in the way of finding solutions. You can spin your wheels and dig yourself in deeper. We know from neuropsychological research (e.g., [Gonçalves et al., 2018](#); [Wronska, Kolańczyk, & Nijstad, 2018](#)) that an excess of reliance on task-focused brain processes tends to be effective for accomplishing short-term, clear results but also leads to a diminution in creativity and the necessary byways of divergent thinking. You know this experience if you have ever been unable to remember something, and the harder you tried, the less you could retrieve it; you had to put it aside for a while, so it might have come to you when you least expected it.

This is very important for psychotherapy. Of course, when “therapeutic mindfulness” helps clients to stand back, suspend judgment, and become participant-observers with their experience, it frees attention to roam beyond the highly narrowed attention that accompanies despair, threat, hopelessness, and a lack of a feeling of control over one’s life. Here, mindfulness is akin to what all therapies do. But in the current climate, where the focus tends to be on setting clear treatment goals and assessing how well they are achieved, such a focus turns mindfulness into a technique that limits its transformative potential. The emphasis shifts more to control than to discovery. Therapy then runs the risk of becoming a kind of treatment machine, and we run a risk the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu warned about two millennia ago ([Chuang Tzu, 319 B.C./1968](#)): falling prey to machine worries can eventually lead to machine hearts. When our therapy becomes mechanical, it adopts a narrow beam of attention that does not allow room to roam, scan, or hover as needed until it stumbles upon the startlingly different or unexpected. To the extent therapy insists on having narrow goals, it constrains the possibility of stimulating a creative shift in perspective. For such shifts to occur, they do not need more time or more sessions; they need an expanded field of liberation.

This is why client-centered therapy in its pure form—as practiced especially in England, but also in Chicago—is almost a kind of cosharing mindfulness. The therapist is not supposed to have any goals whatsoever for the client. In fact, one therapist-trainer makes her trainees sign a pledge not to have any goals for the client. The only “goal” is held by the therapist for his- or herself—to be present and try to empathically witness and listen. When someone reflects your own experience back to you, it strengthens both your own reflexivity and the sense of a wider intersubjective reality ([Ikemi, 2017](#)). It is the pure experience of being-with, listening, and being there with the client that is the avenue for clients to realize themselves.

Buddhist practice also aims at this kind of liberation; its practice of mindfulness is about one’s whole being, not just a skill to control one’s anxiety or depression. It is related to living a “good” life, so to speak, or a “rightful” life, much more than about a skill to manage one’s emotions. This differs from the current “therapeutic” use of mindfulness, but it would be a tragedy if therapists lose sight of how acting ethically, caring for other beings, and so forth is itself a way of being therapeutic for oneself along with others. For this reason, Buddhism advises against meditating purely from a self-centered standpoint, as a way to achieve your personal desires ([Magid & Poirer, 2016](#)). It’s not that Buddhism regards personal desires as bad; rather, Buddhism views personal desire as creating suffering because in its isolating individuality, it is inherently delusive. Psychologists know that our desires are allied with preconceptions that prejudice our perceptions and influence our behaviors—often outside of our awareness. Many of us who are Buddhist practitioners as well as psychotherapists are concerned that by presenting meditation as an instrumental technique for self-improvement, mindfulness becomes a skill to acquire.

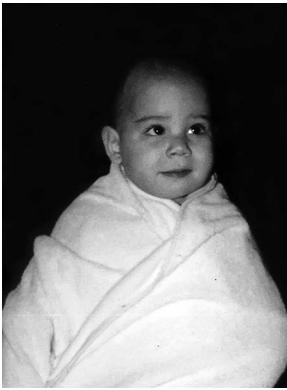


Figure 1. Robert Rosenbaum's daughter at approximately six months of age.

I (Rosenbaum) have a much-treasured photo of my daughter at approximately six months (see Figure 1). She has no words yet, but in the photo, her eyes are open. Is she mindful? If we think of mindfulness as a skill, it might not make sense to say that my daughter is mindful. I would argue, though, that it is rare to find any adult as mindful as an infant; they drink in the world with full awareness, with a minimum of adding or subtracting to the impressions they register. I've recently witnessed the birth of a healthy granddaughter, and I have been impressed, marveling at her development during the first few months, how she is constantly "waking up." You can see little dawns of awareness in her eyes, in her musculature, and in her responsivity as body sensations and her reactions to them begin to register.

The problem with much that is written about mindfulness is that it takes too much for granted. This is ironical, given how mindfulness involves, among other practices, the cultivation of radical innocence, bare awareness, and the humility of not knowing. I suggest we do not know what we mean either by the word "mind" or the word "fullness"—leaving "mindfulness" as virgin territory to explore. Perhaps mindfulness is that quality which, no matter how much it is practiced, remains unmarked; for all the intercourse we have with mindfulness, moment by moment, it is always virginal even while being infinitely wise. It is like the sky; clouds do not hinder the sky, and neither do thoughts, feelings, sensations, urges, or material substances impede mindfulness.

If we treat mindfulness as a technique, as a skill that can be acquired, mastered, and enlisted in the service of personal accomplishment, it devalues meditation as an activity *in itself*, without needing any end to justify it. It also risks making meditation a self-centered activity or a competitive sport to see who can be the "most mindful" and win a gold star, prompting the oft-asked question, "Am I there yet?" This will ultimately be self-defeating. It reminds me of how on treks in Nepal, I often hear tired hikers ask their Sherpa guides, "How much further?" The Sherpas always smile and respond, "Not far now," whether it will be another five minutes or five hours to the next stopping point. The Sherpa is really saying, "Enjoy yourself with each step!"

Mindfulness From a Buddhist Perspective

"So what is mindfulness from a Buddhist perspective?" In traditional Buddhist practice, mindfulness is a natural human faculty common to everyone (Fronsdal & Erdstein, 2016), but it tends to become obscured by our self-centered preoccupations. It is natural to want something out of meditation practice, but the solution, in Buddhism, is to practice not for one's self but for the benefit of all beings. That includes you but is not limited to you. Hence, the traditional way of cultivating mindfulness does not rely just on meditation but on living a life in accord with ethical precepts. If you live by right action, right livelihood, right speech, and the rest of the Eightfold Path, cultivating kindness and compassion, mindfulness emerges naturally.

Buddhist practice is largely a matter of gradually realizing you are not separate from everyone and everything. This includes the practice itself, which is not an exercise in

individual effort but an activity observed within a community—what Buddhists refer to as the *sangha*. This is consistent with modern public health research, which consistently reminds us that personal health is dependent on the health of the community as a whole. While MBSR certainly can be very helpful for individual practitioners, if you live in a place with bad air and bad water, where many other people are ill, unvaccinated, and can become vectors of disease, sitting on your cushion will not stop you from getting sick.

More fundamentally, the very act of meditation is not purely a matter of individual talent or effort. If you approach meditation this way, you'll strain and get frustrated. Meditation requires us to let go, open up, become receptive to mindfulness, and become a vessel for mindfulness—not its master. My teacher Sojun Mel Weitsman liked to quote his own teacher, Shunryu Suzuki, saying, “To think you are the one who is meditating—this is a big mistake.”

There are many meditation practices that help us tune into this. It is good to be aware of the breath and to be able to notice thoughts are just thoughts and sensations are just sensations. Labeling them as such is helpful; it makes us less likely to feel compelled by our thoughts and feelings. However, the purpose of the meditation is not just to make us more capable of recognizing thoughts and to recognize “I am not my thoughts.” The Abhidhamma breaks experience down into its “bits and pieces” so that we can stop identifying with any of them. Meditation fundamentally aims even further, asking, “Who are you really? Who is it who is thinking, feeling, sensing? Who is it who is aware?” Gradually or suddenly, we come to realize there is *no unchangeable essence* to this self. This is the truth of interbeing.

“OK, so ‘attention’ and ‘purpose’ have some problems. You probably would agree that being ‘nonjudgmental’ is an important part of mindfulness?” I think “*ajudgmental*” might be a better word. The problem with being “nonjudgmental” is that it carries a whiff of the very moralistic fervor it tries to eschew—as if it’s referring to a dimension of right/wrong or good/bad. Besides, if you are attached to being nonjudgmental, you can be very disapproving of people who you see as being judgmental!

In Buddhism, we do not renounce good judgment; in fact, we cultivate discernment. Traditionally, insight meditation helps practitioners develop the ability to not only become aware of our experience but also to recall it in the light of the precepts and the contexts of “right action” and “right concentration,” as set forth in the Eightfold Path. However, this is not “right” as opposed to “wrong.” Rather, it is “right” in the sense of “just right”; what fits the situation, and what promotes wholeness? Mindfulness helps us be aware of whether our thoughts, actions, and speech are in keeping with what Taoist philosophers referred to as “the Way.” Many people refer to the Tao (the Way) but have overlooked that Lao Tsu’s verses are titled the *Tao Te Ching*. While there are many translations of “te,” I prefer to translate it as “rightness”—the concordance between the Way and its expression in everyday activity (Rosenbaum, 2013). “Right” does not require us to be detached from what is happening; rather, “right” behooves us to cultivate a sense of inner navigation and of recognizing whenever we stray off the path so we can realign ourselves to be in harmony with whatever response a situation calls for.

It helps, when meditating, to let go of judgments of good and bad. However, this does not go far enough. Consider Dogen’s (1233/2010) instructions for meditation: after saying, “Do not think good or bad,” he adds, “Do not judge true or false. Give up the operations of mind, intellect, consciousness; stop measuring with thoughts, ideas, and views. Think not-thinking. . . *beyond* thinking” (pp. 907–908).

We want to cultivate a mind that is not *composed* of thoughts, feelings, impulses, and perceptions but rather the “Big Mind” that is the *container* for thoughts, feelings,

impulses, and perception. Sometimes we call this the “mind of clover.” This Big Mind does not discriminate, so sometimes it is called “mirror mind”; whatever appears is reflected. It’s important to recognize reflections are just reflections, not reality; it’s also important to become intimate with the mirror itself. Becoming more aware of our egotistic prejudices, cognitive biases, and predilections based on likes and dislikes, we polish away at the blockages and blind spots, smoothing out warps in the mirror that distort the bare “suchness” of whatever arises. We begin to realize how much we think of as “me” is merely bumps and scrapes on the mirror; conversely, we begin to let go of the images of ourselves that cloud the mirror.

Of course, we’re human. To the extent we represent the world “in” our minds, we will always misrepresent it. However, cognitive science and philosophy are helping us learn that perception is not necessarily a matter of representation; there is also a direct “resonance” that responds to and embodies all we experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Locatelli & Wilson, 2017). Mindfulness moves us away from knee-jerk reactivity—where our awareness arises *from* an experience—to an observational mode, so we can be aware *of* an experience. Yet it does not stop there; mindfulness deepens until we begin to lose our hold on self and object and instead enjoy what Buddhists call “dependent co-arising”: our awareness arises *with* an experience.

To say this another way, we start with being unaware, taking for granted our perceptions are real, thinking our feelings are who we are, and feeling we are who we think we are. Mindfulness helps us get a little distance from the thoughts and feelings and perceptions; it’s not just a matter of becoming aware of the body and breath but of providing a little space around them; we cultivate an attitude where we—to use Jotika and Dhamminda’s (1986) mindfulness instructions in the *Satipatthana Sutta*—“dwell perceiving again and again the body/breath as just the body/breath, not mine, not I, not self, but just a phenomenon” (p. 7). Then, as we turn awareness on itself, we dwell in body and mind, thought and feeling, as not mine, not I, not self, *and also* not other than mine, not other than I, not other than self. We and the world arise together, linked by need and love.

Returning to the simile of the original mirror, drawing on the *Shobogenzo* essay “Old Mirror” (Dogen 1241/2010; Rosenbaum, 2003), we can ask, “What happens when a clear mirror faces a clear mirror?” The response is “smashed into thousands of pieces!” (Dogen 1241/2010 p. 209; Rosenbaum, 2003). We’re back to the multitude of beings we encounter at each moment, millions upon millions. This is why mind is beyond measure—and mindfulness is beyond measure.

Mindfulness—“The Nuts and Bolts”

“That all sounds kind of mystical. Can’t we get back to the concrete nuts and bolts of mindfulness?” There’s nothing more mystical than concrete nuts and bolts. Here’s what Dogen (1243/1997, 1249/2004a, 1249/2004b) had to say about the mind:

Mountains, rivers, earth, the sun,
the moon, and stars are mind.

At just this moment,

what is it that appears directly in front of you?

There is a knowing apart from passionate thought and discrimination. It makes one raise one’s eyebrows and blink. It makes one walk, stand, sit, and lie down, be confused, get into trouble, die here and be born there, eat when hungry and sleep when tired. . . .

Blues, yellows, reds, and whites are the mind.
 The long, the short, the square, and the round are the mind.
 It [the mind] has thinking, sensing, mindfulness, and realization
 and it is free of thinking, sensing, mindfulness, and realization;
 it is fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles
 and it is mountains, rivers, and the Earth. . . .

“Is that concrete enough for you?”

“You’re giving me a headache. I just want to live life fully. That’s why I like to practice mindfulness; it helps me not think too much and just be in the present moment.” Being sincerely wholehearted is good. Not thinking too much is good. Understanding is also good, but it should not get in the way of acknowledging the reality of what Buddhists call *tathata*, “suchness.” Although the suchness of being “in the present moment” is vital, it is not at all what most people think it is. Mindfulness is nothing if it is not going beyond what people think things are, to the reality of what Suzuki (1999) called “things as *It is*” (Suzuki, 1999; p. 30).

Mindfulness and Temporality

I first became interested in meditation when, in college, I heard Ram Dass (Richard Alpert) lecture and then read his book *Be Here Now* (Dass, 1971). I had not received much instruction in meditation at that point, so I just sat down, followed my breath, and said to myself, “OK, here! Now!” As soon as I said that, I realized I was a little late, a little after-the-fact, separate from the immediate moment. I kept trying and trying to get the delay between perception and awareness, experience and labeling, down to where there was not a gap. I failed repeatedly but kept trying until I realized it is not possible. Time is not something separate from us. We think of time as if it is a *thing*, occupying space with a certain length or width; we say that a future event is “approaching” or “coming up” and a past event is “far behind us.” But where is this “moment” we’re trying to be “in?”

Many modern physicists advocate doing away with the notion of time entirely; in equations that attempt to reconcile quantum mechanics with general relativity, the “time” terms cancel each other out and vanish. Einstein famously commented (quoted in Dyson, 1979, p. 193) that time is an illusion, but a very stubborn one. Even those physicists who advocate retaining time in their mathematics do not talk about it as its own entity, but as “space-time,” and agree it may be a field but is not a tangible unvarying “thing”—clocks “tell” time differently if they are at sea level versus the top of Mount Everest and run faster or slower according to the speed at which they move. Of course, subjectively, we all have had the experience of the variability of subjective time—a boring meeting that seems to go on forever or a lovers’ tryst that ends all too soon—and these subjective “measurements” of time are just as valid as our unreliable clock conventions because time is *ungraspable*. The Diamond sutra Price and Moulam, 2005 noted long ago that it’s impossible to clasp hold of past mind; the past is gone. It’s impossible to seize hold of future mind; the future is not here yet. What most people forget is that it is also impossible to clutch hold of present mind; *the present cannot be grasped*.

“In that case, what time do we practice mindfulness in?” In his essay “The Time Being,” Dogen (1240/2010) observed that “the mind arises in a moment; a moment arises in the mind” (p. 105). His conclusion? “The self is time” (p. 105). I like to rephrase it: *you are the time of your life*. You cannot have the time of your life, but you, constantly,

continually, *are* the time of your life. Mindfulness brings this home to us. Since we are not separate from time, every moment is all there is, and every moment is *us*—together with all beings.

Conclusion

“I don’t like this. There’s nothing to hold on to.” This is mindfulness: the living realization that there is nothing to hold on to and our responsiveness to the dynamic, ever-changing experience of living-and-dying and self-and-other. It’s a dance that is quite beyond our liking or not liking. Liberation arises from mindfulness not because when we become more aware of what is going on, we gain more control (though often we do discover a wider field of options) or seize more power (of which the temptations are risky). Mindfulness is not a method, but an invitation. It is healing precisely because it cannot be grasped:

Living-and-dying and coming-and-going are the mind.
 Years, months, days, and hours are the mind.
 Dreams and fantasies, and flowers in space, are the mind.
 The spray of water, foam, and flame are the mind.
 Spring flowers and the autumn moon are the mind.
 Each moment is the mind.
 And yet it can never be broken. (Dogen 1243/1997, pp. 40–41)

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