Re-thinking Mindfulness



An invitation to broaden our definition and understanding of Mindfulness

By Bo Heimann, M.A. Leadership & Organizational Psychology, Mindfulness Teacher
www.boheimann.com

Mindfulness is blazing through the West today – and what a fantastic sight that is!

For 2500 years this torch of wisdom was only accessible for dedicated Buddhist practioners in far away monasteries; now it´s a light at everybody doorsteps.

This is a fantastic achievement. Our modern world is in my view in a severe need for this 'technology of the mind'. We as individuals find ourselves in a frenzy-hectic tour de force each day, challenged by ever more nuanced and fast changing demands on our jobs, our family life and time for ourselves. Organizations struggle to adapt to an ever changing market and economical climate; and our societies a facing an enormous task taking on challenges regarding the climate, the economy, securing help for poor, the old and the sick and provide education for the next generations.

I do believe that Mindfulness can be of help on all these levels. In fact I believe that Mindfulness is absolutely essential when it comes to change our lives and our world to the better. Which is also why I strongly care about how we understand, practice and teach Mindfulness.

Thus this invitation to re-think Mindfulness a bit. I´d like to suggest that we 1) need to look at the original sources once again, 2) really take into account the importance of 'sila' and 3) deeply consider the importance of our intention for practicing.

The modern understanding

Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn has been more than anyone else the pivotal and central figure in bringing Mindfulness to the West. His contribution calls for the uttermost respect.

His definition is today by far the most widely spread and used definition**:** *'Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.'*[1]

A broader understanding

Being conscious non-judgmental present in the moment gives us two things: First, a greater ability to more consciously choose our responses to both external and internal circumstances (we will in other words, be more free of our habitual thoughts and emotional reactions), and second, it gives us a basic relaxation of both body and mind (when we do not judge, we don´t activate the part of our nervous system (sympaticus) that controls the 'flight or fight'-response).



Our modern world is in a severe need for Mindfulness, this 'technology of the mind'. But we need to look at the original sources again.

All of us can benefit from this. It seems though that there´s more to Mindfulness than this. It might be that Mr. Kabat-Zinn would agree, actually I think he does, but his

[1] Also in 'Wherever you go, there you are', Hyperion, 1994.

definition has nonetheless fostered the above understanding of Mindfulness which I find too narrow.

Mindfulness according to Budhha

Let´s look then at the Buddhist roots in search for a broader understanding. What we today call Mindfulness actually consists of two different meditation techniques that are trained in traditional Buddhism in the order they are presented below:

- Shamatha (calm abing) – training the mind's ability to focus.
- Vipashyana (insight) – helping the mind to gain insights.

Shamathameditations can be described as an exercise of the mind's ability to focus, concentrate and stay focused on one thing only at the time. It is an absolutely essential quality of the mind that can be trained like any other muscle.

This is very much aligned with Mr. Kabat-Zinns definition:

'Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.'

But the ability to paying attention in the present moment is in my opinion not containing the richness of Mindfulness. This quality first of all can be used for anything – even very useless or damaging purposes. Secondly the skills can be further trained in other ways than using Mindfulness. And finally this says nothing about neither our intention to practice nor the attitudes, we are approach training with or wish to cultivate. In other words: It is a too narrow and too thin understanding of Mindfulness if understood literally.

Mindfulness is translated from the concept of 'sati' in Pali, the language of the Buddha's earliest teachings. 'Sati' as Mindfulness is today translated into 'awareness' or 'skillful attentiveness'.

But were we today speak of 'paying attention non-judgmentally' (which perhaps wrongly can be understood more or less as Shamatha isolated?), the Buddha himself pointed at a remembrance-ability (which focuses also on Vipashyana part of Mindfulness): *'And what, monks, are the property of sati? Here, monks, the noble disciple has sati, he is equipped with perfect sati and intellect, he is one who remembers, one recalling what was done and said long ago.'*



A focused and undisturbed mind is also of value for snipers. Surely there´s more to genuine Mindfulness.

These words of the Buddha does not comp to the idea, that Mindfulness is only about the mind's ability to focus, and concentrate.

Remember to avoid misdeeds

There seems to be more to it. Buddha's own words on 'sati' seems include 'to remember' or 'non-forgetfulness'.

Focus and concentration must therefore, according to Buddha, be paired with insight. In Pali ithe full name of Vipasyana (insight-meditation) is 'Vipasyana Bhavana', which is probably best translated as 'cultivation of the mind with the goal of achieving full insight'.



Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche: 'The general role of Mindfulness is to remember to avoid misdeeds and to remind oneself to do what is wholesome.'

With 'full insight' my best guess is that we see reality as it is, that we are able to distinguish between real and non-real. It is this ability that ultimately is designated by the Buddha as 'sati' (Mindfulness).

My teacher, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, writes in line with the above about Mindfulness: 'the general role of Mindfulness is to remember to avoid misdeeds and to remind oneself to do what is wholesome.'[2]

Yes, we need to be able to focus – but on the right things!

The Buddhist monk, Nagasena, who lived around the year 150 BCE, is considered a very important interpreter of the Buddha's words. He had this to say about 'sati': 'Sati has both the characteristic of 'calling to mind' and the characteristic of 'taking hold'... when it arises, it calls to mind wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, with faults and faultless, inferior and refined, dark and pure, together with their counterparts; sati, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies: these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful. Thus, one who practices yoga rejects unbeneficial tendencies and cultivates beneficial tendencies.'[3]

Nagasena obviously here – like Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche – brings in a normative element in Mindfulness (the ability to distinguish 'between beneficial and unbeneficial ... helpful and unhelpful'), which, I do believe, also is contained in the Buddha's 'right-remembrance'. This is quite something more than 'being present'.

It´s about being able to connect to and act from the basis of what´s right; what´s the truth.

The importance of 'sila'

I tend to believe that this points to that we need to remember and include in our understanding of Mindfulness the Buddha´s teaching of the four noble truths and the ethics (or morality) pointed out by the Buddha: 'sila' – right speech, right action and right livelihood.

To a certain degree this aspect seems to be neglected quite often when it comes the modern understanding of Mindfulness.

I find though that great teachers never miss this point. Whenever I have the pleasure of

[2] 'Present Fresh Wakefulness' (Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 2002).

[3] Milindapanha 37-38.

attending a retreat with Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, he always – for hours, sometimes days – stresses the need for us students to really understand and acknowledge the importance of this. Even on so-called 'advanced' Dzogchen-retreats this is the case. In fact his message is always: Without understanding that the ethics is the mandatory basis for anything else, and not the least us acting upon it, never mind meditation! Sila is the basis. Do not proceed without getting that!

Sila – and for the Mahayanas the buddhisattva promise – is the ground on which meditation is built. For the Vajrayanas even, in a strict sense, the intensive preliminary practices also preceeds the meditation training.

Mindfulness in it´s most widely understanding today, I find, has lost this element of building a very solid ground of wisdom and morality for the meditative cultivation of the mind. I suggest we need to find ways to incorporate this in our teachings. Without it, one could argue, it´s actually not Mindfulness – but simply a training of the minds ability to focus.

A question of intent

This ethical element points, I think, to our intention behind practicing Mindfulness. Why are we doing it? Of course originally Mindfulness is part of our pursuit of living a life without suffering; an integral part of recognizing our lack of insight, 'avidya'. We need to remember the truth, right!?

Today in our modern world though, there´s all kind of answers to 'why we´re doing it'. And so be it. I find no harm done in wanting to free oneself from stress, confusion, an undisciplined mind etc. As my fellow Dane Søren Kierkegaard, the famous philosopher, said, if you truly want to help another human being, you must meet him where he his. And we are here to help.



Is the foundation of wisdom and 'sila' emphasized enough in todays Mindfulness teachings?

But taken the above in consideration, our intention as teachers is something we nevertheless should not go lightly about. Do we and those we teach stand on solid ground without a strong emphasis on sila? No, we do not. First of all we of course need to establish a firm ground beneath our own two feet. Next beneath the feet of those we teach. This actually could be viewed as a mandatory prerequisite. But it's not what the world looks like right now, if we're honest.

An ethical crisis

This lack of solid ground beneath our Mindfulness-practice should be considered with high, high vigilance by all of us. Looking at the state of the world those of us offering Mindfulness to organisations and corporations, and I'm one of them, should really take this at heart. It it no longer the church or the govermental institutions that run the

word – it´s the organisations and corporations. What a responsability that is!

We see an economical crisis, an enviromental crisis and crisis in the health- and educationsystems. In many ways all this is about greed. It's an ethical crisis. So we as Mindfulness-teaches are to help the good people in the organisations and corporations to be Mindfull – help them to remember what's right!

This crisis is an invitation to rethink and transcend the basic vision of the management profession, I would say, and look deeper than 'what' they do as leaders, and 'how' they do it. They need to look at the 'why' they do what they do. There is a movement from 'performance' to 'purpose' growing.

By teaching sila, and instructing Metta-meditations, I´d like to think that Mindfulness-training can be supportive of the movement helping leaders to lead 'motivated from a higher purpose' with that loving kindness that automatically comes with that.

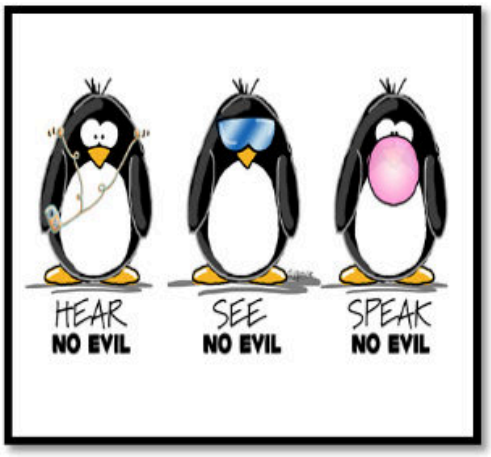
Spiritual bypassing

There's another challenge that could emerge from Mindfulness-training without a solid ground. It can, simply put, contribute to self-deception.

Excessive 'detachment'-ability. Blind focus on positive thinking. Fear of anger and artificial kindness. Neglect of own feelings. Difficulty in setting limits. An intellectual intelligence that is far ahead of the emotional and moral intelligences. Focus on the 'absolute' rather than the 'relative' and personal.

Is there a bell ringing? Yes, the above is found in quite a few of us. And, I'm afraid, is quite common in meditation circles.

The term 'spiritual bypassing' was originally coined by psycho-spiritual teacher John Welwood. Robert Masters, Ph.d, has in his book of the same name, evolved the concept. He notes soberly that the road away from life's pain often end up in a certain form of bypassing-spirituality that is keeping us in pain. I suggest his comes from having no firm ground to stand on.



Quite a few meditators see no need for important psychological work. They want to enjoy the mountaintop view by boing hoisted down by a helicopter.

With the concept of 'bypassing', he believes that many so-called spiritual people (let's count most Mindfulness-practinioners among them, ok!?) tend to skip important psychological work. He compares it to be hoisted down to the mountain top with a helicopter – and therefore end up to be unreliable and vulnerable because the view is not deserved and supported from the inside-out, but purchased and thus hole. We simply have to climb all the way up if we really want to be free, he points out.

There are no shortcuts

Many of us can and will not see that we are trying to cheat us up on the mountain top – in our view, it's only

sensible to skip the difficulty and not use time on our past and so-called 'heavy energy', right!?

We tend to seek and love the 'big breakthrough' and the view from the top of the mountain, but not the small steps and the tough psycho-therapeutic work that's needed to get up there without a helicopter. This journey should of course be almost painless.

In this way, the illusory idea of a shortcut ends up a detour, or perhaps even as a cul de sac. Unfortunately, 'the easy shortcut' is sold by spiritual second hand car dealers. And unfortunately we are up for grabs for empty calories, because we would like to believe that we can do it all in half the time. As serious teachers of Mindfulness we need to stay clear of this.

The hazardous non-dual learning

We as Mindfulness-teachers should also be aware of the of growing 'non-dual' trend: "All is one, and all is well. There is nothing you need, nothing you need to do or change – just be present in the moment. Learn not to identify with your personality and limiting stories about yourself. Realize everything is unity. And be free!" So simple it is said to be.

That we are free – and always have been – but simply forgot our true nature, is the truth. But unfortunately this teaching, without the solid ground to stand on, leads to ideas about that we suddenly do not 'really' have challenges with anxiety, anger, greed, shame, etc. And accordingy no 'rally' need to practice!

The non-dual teachings can be labelled as dangerous because the danger of abandoning our honesty about own humanity, emotions and body is imminent. This focus on the 'absolute' is often an intellectual an escape from ordinary life and personal development. Spiritual bypassers who are attracted to the non-dual, often end up stuck in 'no-man's-land', Masters write. We like to think, we are beyond our personal issues. In fact, we are obviously far from it. I claim it's due to lack of solid ground – lack of cultivating sila.

Re-considering Mindfulness

Mindfulness in its original understanding is about remembering what´s right, remembering the truth. Nothing less that that. It´s so far more than just being present; far far more than the ability to focus.

We should work with an implicit ethics. We should have the liberation of all sentiant beings as our motivating purpose. Compassion and understanding of all things interconnectedness should grow out of our teachings.

If not, it´s not Mindfulness. Thus this invitation to broaden our definition and understanding of Mindfulness.



About the author

Bo Heimann (1971) – M.A. Leadership & Organizational Psychology, B.A. Journalism – has been studying Buddhism since the late 1990´s.

His M.A.-thesis on Scharmer's Theory U was published by Gyldendal Business in 2013 ('Teori U – kritik og perspektiver). He has authored nine other books on the development of consciousness (so far in Danish only).

Since 2004 he has been an independent consultant helping people, teams and organizations to achieve greater self-awareness. He works as a coach, trainer, facilitator, author and journalist.

He is a fellow of Oxford Leadership Academy, Senior Trainer at The Potential Project and connected to SoulWorks and Maul A/S and work as such across Europe with clients such as Telefonica, Pågen, If Insurance, SEB Banken, Danish Institute for Human Rights and Roxtec amongst others.