

Mindfulness: The Art of Being Human

William Van Gordon • Edo Shonin

The final publication is published in *Mindfulness* and is available at Springer at DOI:

10.1007/s12671-017-0819-6

William Van Gordon ✉

Centre for Psychological Research, University of Derby, Kedleston Road, Derby, Derbyshire,
DE22 1GB

*Corresponding Author: Email w.vangordon@derby.ac.uk

Edo Shonin

Awake to Wisdom Centre for Meditation and Mindfulness Research, Ragusa, Italy

There are an increasing number of people interested in practicing mindfulness. Perhaps this reflects a growing wish amongst people to live a more peaceful life and connect with a deeper part of themselves. Or perhaps it simply reflects people's wish to be fashionable and partake in a recent lifestyle trend. Either way, if as little as 5% of the population of each country was to practice mindfulness wholeheartedly, we believe the benefits to the wellbeing of this planet would be immense. It would mean that at least one in twenty people were fully experiencing the wisdom and wonder of the present moment. It would mean that the same number of people were closely observing their thoughts, emotions, and mental processes, and choosing how to act in response to those mental processes rather than be governed by them. It would mean that at every major meeting of government officials, military generals, and business leaders, there would be one or two individuals who, guided by the wisdom of mindfulness, were able to inject spiritual insight into the dialogue. The same applies to seemingly less impactful gatherings such as a discussion between friends in the pub or on social media, a debate between university students, or a conversation amongst parents waiting outside school to collect their children. Because their thoughts, words and actions are infused with wisdom and compassion, a person rooted in the present moment is like a brightly shining star that can be used to help navigate in the dark. They invigorate those around them and point out the way to individuals wanting to leave behind mindless living and find their inner self. Their capacity to improve the future of this planet should not be underestimated.

During the past six months, we have worked with meditation communities and conducted workshops, retreats or speeches on mindfulness-related themes in many Eastern and Western countries. Some of these events were international in scope and therefore attended by mindfulness teachers and practitioners reflecting a greater range of countries than those that we visited. Consequently, we have been provided with what could be considered a snapshot of the current state or quality of mindfulness practice across multiple countries.

While we are conscious that this snapshot will not reflect all countries or mindfulness practice communities, and that it could be limited by our own biases or faulty perceptions, it has given rise to some concerns.

Being used by mindfulness

Whilst increasingly more people are practicing and teaching mindfulness, we wonder whether this comes at a cost to both the mindfulness practitioner and society more generally. More specifically, it appears that when some people start to practice or teach mindfulness, they forget to be themselves. They become too serious and try to act in a manner that they deem is appropriate for a 'meditator' or spiritual person. They become so concerned with appearing to be mindful, their tension and superficiality becomes palpable. They forget to laugh and be spontaneous, and they forget how to be a human being.

Our advice to individuals wishing to learn how to practice or teach mindfulness is to not become obsessed with mindfulness and focus instead on being a good human being. As human beings, we are all equipped with the capacity to be joyful, loving, selfless and spontaneous. We don't need mindfulness to cultivate these core human competencies. We can cultivate them simply by making an effort to do so. It really is that simple. If we find that we are wallowing in self-pity, we can choose to shake off the bad mood, appreciate how fortunate we are to be on this earth, and start to feel joyful and alive. If we are feeling irritable or angry, we can choose – there and then – to be patient, loving towards ourselves and others, and see the futility of saying or doing hurtful things.

It appears that some people believe mindfulness can be used to mask over the ego and issues they have going on inside of them. Mindfulness helps us to become aware of aspects of our being that are unskillful or require attention, but it takes more than mindfulness to uproot

deep-seated maladaptive behavioral tendencies. First and foremost, bringing about lasting psycho-spiritual growth requires us to wholeheartedly commit to this change process. It requires us to be convinced about the mind's capacity to evolve and understand that realizing this capacity will require hard work as well as compromise on the part of the ego.

It is only when we have cultivated this firm intent to develop both personally and spiritually, that we can truly begin to work in harmony with mindfulness and derive maximum benefit from its practice. Under such circumstances, mindfulness can act as a lens that helps us to focus upon and gain a deeper understanding of our psychological anatomy. We can then make appropriate interventions and cut and prune unskillful cognitive and behavioral habits as required.

However, if we are premature and start to practice or teach mindfulness without understanding its role and the degree of hard work that self-growth requires, instead of using mindfulness as a tool, mindfulness will use us. If we are not diligent in this manner, mindfulness will become a slave to the ego and will serve to strengthen a predisposition towards greed, superficiality and self-preoccupation. People who are used by mindfulness may be able to fool themselves and others regarding their capacity as a mindfulness teacher or practitioner. However, such individuals have no place in the timeless lineage of authentic spiritual teachers, and they will leave this life confused and emptyhanded.

Working in harmony with mindfulness

When we understand that commitment and intent underlie effective mindfulness practice, we can start to work in harmony with mindfulness. Using mindfulness, we can observe unskillful thought processes and feelings as they start to grow inside of us, and we can transform them before they take hold and dictate our behavior. We can examine what

prompted such unskillful thoughts or emotions, and in so doing, we should hopefully see that ego has played a central role in their formation. Similar to the bright lamp used in surgical operations, mindfulness is like a light that we can shine on the mind to see it clearly as well as understand how best to nurture wholesome qualities.

What we are seeking to elucidate here is that there is both a passive and active element to mindfulness. The passive element involves observing what is happening inside and outside of us. Based on this observation, we can then judge what type of intervention might be required. This triggers the active element of mindfulness which might require us to derail or uproot destructive mental processes inside ourselves, or steer others toward more wholesome behavior. It appears that some individuals believe mindfulness does not require judgement and that just by observing the mind, problems will simply dissolve and pass us by. However, this isn't the case. Mindfulness requires judgement born from meditative equanimity and clarity of observation, and it involves action or intervention born from compassion and wisdom.

Working in harmony with mindfulness is a challenging but beautiful experience. When we aren't afraid to work hard and get our hands dirty, mindfulness – and the present moment that it brings us into contact with – serves as a guide on the path of spiritual awareness. Using mindfulness, we can see the direction that we must go, where we can find spiritual support, and the pitfalls to avoid. When we relate to and use mindfulness correctly, it helps us to sever the cords of ego that underlie ignorance and suffering.

Working in harmony with mindfulness allows us to remain down-to-earth and to be ourselves. In fact, the essence of mindfulness practice is to embrace all that it means to be a good human being. This means responsibly enjoying the beautiful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations that this planet has to offer. It means shedding a tear when we are sad

and laughing when we are happy. It means falling in love, buying a house and making it look nice, taking care of our appearance, and being enthusiastic about our career. Both individuals practicing mindfulness and those living mindlessly experience feelings of, for example, desire, impatience, happiness, and contentment. However, the difference is that the latter are slaves to those feelings whereas the former has the courage to confront and remain fully aware of what is happening inside and outside of them. Observing and consciously engaging with the present moment during everyday living will bring us into contact with the circumstances and challenges necessary to cultivate all of the psycho-spiritual skills required for the mind to evolve. Under such circumstances, we don't need to go looking for the path because simply by embracing what it means to be a good human being, we are already walking it.

A strange wind blows

We would like to finish this paper by sharing a reflection that we wrote recently called *A Strange Wind Blows*:

Gone, all is gone.

Nothing remains.

Completely alone.

Silence abounds.

Nothing to fight for.

No more doing.

No more being.

The path has been discarded.

How sublime to abide in nothingness.

Seeing beyond the reach of time and space.

Inexpressible in words.

Ah, such profound peace.

But all is not as it should be.

A strange wind blows.

A dark shadow encroaches.

Smothering being's hearts.

Gathering the energy of the universe.

I shall turn the Wheel of Truth.

The shadow may encroach no further.

Not on my watch. Not on my watch.

Blessed by the wisdom of my forefathers.

I shall defeat all inner and outer obstacles.

Brilliant white light will shine throughout space and time.

Dispersing ignorance and hatred.

The harvest will be painfully small.

Most will fall and drown.

But some will inhale the breath of life.

Come now, there is much to do.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.