Kindness and Compassion as Integral to Mindfulness
Experiencing the Knowable in a Special Way

Western psychology and neuroscience has recently shown great interest in examining and adopting elements of Buddhist psychology, such as mindfulness and compassion practices.

Kindness and compassion are integral to mindful awareness.

Understanding what mindfulness is requires experiencing what mindfulness is.
Kindness and Compassion as Integral to Mindfulness

If you mysteriously happened to light upon this particular paper out of the enormous, overwhelming, mind-boggling plethora of recently written commodities about happiness, consciousness, mindfulness or compassion, you might – just maybe – be willing to begin the reading by first taking part in a very brief and very personal experiment involving the mind, the body and the proverbial heart. It is an imperfect, completely unsatisfactory little exercise, as so much of our lives and experiences is imperfect and less than satisfactory (still we continue to go on, often simultaneously or alternately, feeling both appreciation and disappointment). Nevertheless, this little experiment is the only way I know to convey a glimmer of sense about something that really has to be experienced before it is talked about or even named – even though this necessity is rarely acknowledged. So let’s start (you may want to turn on the audio version of this exercise and continue reading later).

A Personal Experiment

Paul Grossman
"A Personal Experiment"
19:17 min

Let’s begin by making sure you are sitting comfortably in a position that you think you are able to maintain for a little while – notice the angle of your back, how your head is sitting on your shoulders, whether your arms, legs, feet and hands are loose and relaxed, or cramped and tight. Make any adjustments that give you the feeling you are more at ease and comfortable, that all the different parts of your body are as relaxed as can be.

Now take a couple of deep breaths and notice the spot where you feel the flow of air entering and exiting the body most completely. It may be at the nostrils, somewhere in your abdomen or your chest. Look for a spot where you think you can best rest your attention in order to make contact with the flow of life that the breath really, truly constitutes. When you have found a more-or-less satisfactory spot, stop consciously making your breathing deeper or slower, and let the breath take its natural course. This means we let the breath do its own thing just like it has for the many decades before this moment. You may or may not have paid much attention to your breath before. Nevertheless, right now, we are intentionally, voluntarily examining the breath – as close up as we can come to feeling the sensations of the in- and the out-breath – as they naturally flow without us trying in any way to “improve” our breathing.

So – as best you can – notice the sensations that arise at the spot you have chosen at each moment that the breath changes – throughout the period of breathing in, the transition from in-breath to out-breath, the flow during expiration and the shifting from expiration to inspiration. And
just continue this process of noticing from breath to breath how it feels.

Are you still with me, or did your attention already fly away and alight on some other thing? No matter, if this has happened and you still want to remain with this little exercise, just make the briefest of mental notes about what just distracted you and return to the sensations of the breath. Should you be like almost everyone else, you may have already noticed that your attention quickly shifts and wavers, and that it is not very long before you are once again someplace very different from the spot where you are in close contact with your vital process of breathing. The distractions may happen somewhere in the middle of the first breath, or – if you have especially good powers of concentration – it may take 3 or 4 breaths before you find your attention somewhere else.

Maybe you notice some frustration bubbling up as you repeatedly try to redirect your attention back to the breath, only to find the mind wandering away once again before you can even complete the next breath. Maybe the thought arises, I am lousy at this, or this is a really stupid exercise; what nonsense to watch my breathing anyhow; it’s done fine without me all these years. Or maybe you find yourself capable of following the physical sensations of the breath rather continuously for a little while only to feel that the breath is actually quite uncomfortable – too tight, too short, too irregular, too this or too that. On the other hand, maybe you can follow the breath for a while and feel a deep sense of relaxation and the desire to hold on to it because it feels so good, only once again for the mind unexpectedly to wander someplace else or the positive feeling to somehow dissolve or transform into some less comfortable perception, like discomfort, tedium or boredom.

Now humor this writer for a few minutes longer and continue this exercise – as best you can. But this time, allow yourself (also merely as well as you can) to let even any unpleasant distractions, thoughts and feelings just be – as the natural states of the mind and the body that sometimes arise – since they are, anyhow, there, whether we like them or not. Whatever is going on in the moment, gently retain awareness of each instant of your breathing as best you can, and bring the mind back to the breath each time you notice it straying. Realize that at this very moment, whatever you are feeling, perceiving or thinking, it is as good as it gets: you can’t change what has already happened. It may be more pleasant than the previous moment, it may be less pleasant, but right now we are sitting with what is. We can either investigate it, examine it from all sides, try to penetrate the inner substance of our breathing experience by being open, patient and tolerant with it (to whatever degree that is possible for us in this particular moment), or we can turn away from the experience, attempt to flee it, by escaping into other perceptions, images, thoughts of past, present or future that obscure or camouflage the immediate experience of our breathing.

So, provided you still are willing, try for just a little while longer to stay closely in contact with each moment of your breathing by applying whatever amount of patience, kindness, tolerance and generosity you currently have at your disposal, aiming your attention at whatever surfaces during the process – attempting to apply kindness and patience to the wandering mind, tolerance and openness to any discomfort, boredom or withdrawal from calm, relaxing sensations. And notice if the quality of your paying attention to the breath changes in any way – even whether for the briefest moments you might be able to let go of the impatience, judgments and self-criticism that arise during this “simple” mind-body experiment of attending to the sensations of the breath. Perhaps you become aware of a few fleeting moments in which your powers of concentration, attention and investigation are in harmony with a state of ease and receptiveness. Or perhaps, you only are aware of an increasingly seething impatience with this little exercise. But even in the latter case, maybe it is possible for you just to let this discomfort go for a moment or two, and to
kindly and curiously examine how even this discomfort feels? Ah, discomfort feels like this; pleasant sensations feel like that.

Now gently return to this text as your object of attention.

**Possible Insights into What You Just Experienced**

The purpose of this experiment was that you might be able to make very brief acquaintance with a particular way of experiencing the present moment – in this case paying attention to your breathing. Perhaps it may also illustrate that the act of paying attention in this special manner is neither simple nor just a matter of concentrating one's focus upon a particular object or phenomenon. To really pay attention means to settle ourselves in a calm environment in which we are not constantly distracted by thoughts, images, memories or emotions that pull us away from where we intend to look (see also **Box VI**). The development of this process requires exercising not only our powers of attention, but also our powers of openness and acceptance of what, at the moment, has, in fact, already occurred, and therefore we are unable to change. This process necessitates repeatedly returning to the object of attention when we realize we have strayed, which means – given the eternally wandering mind you may have just discovered – that we learn patience in the process.

This pertains not only to awareness of the breath. The breath, as the object of attention, is just a somewhat simplified microcosm of all aspects of perceptible experience[1]. The wavering and flightiness of our attention is rampant and applies not only to attending to our breath but to awareness of all aspects of our lives. In fact, if we have difficulty in being fully aware of a simple process like breathing, we might reflect upon what that suggests about our ability to be fully aware of more complex experience like attention to our work, our relationships, our environment.

**Towards an Embodied Ethics of Attention, Experience and Understanding**

The process, or practice, I have just described derives from a view of existence and a kind of psychology that is really quite different from the way we usually see things in the West, where cognitive processes of attention, orienting and awareness traditionally have rarely been connected to socioemotional qualities like kindness, generosity, compassion, courage or patience (see also chapter 9). In fact, these latter behavioral tendencies or qualities have only infrequently been seriously discussed or investigated in Western psychology (having, long ago, been relegated to religion or, perhaps worse, to sentimentality)! We are good at criticizing, and analyzing fame and blame, baser emotions like fear, angst and depression (see also chapter 3), but consideration of kindness and compassion as legitimate topics typically has often seemed just too softheaded (one might ask why?).

When oriented towards a general worldview, qualities such as kindness, tolerance and compassion, can actually be viewed as fundaments of an ethical system that counters more popular and prevailing systems of moral values (e.g., moral values based upon religious imperatives, or societally rooted ideas like utilitarianism [conduct aimed at promoting greatest benefit for the greatest number of people], or the ethical egoism of Ayn Rand [which proposes individuals should maximize their own self-interest]). It is a system that may also be characterized as more grounded in immediate action and consequences, rather than the elaborated grand goals of other ethical orientations. Thus, kindness, compassion and generosity as ethical principles of behavior are supposed to supplant baser emotions that can develop in systems that embrace dichotomies of values, such as success vs. failure, praise vs. blame, fame vs. disrepute, and pleasure vs. pain.
The process I describe seamlessly combines the cognitive, the social and the emotional with ethical values in a way that – at least at first sight – is quite alien to our usual view of things: the cognitive, the socioemotional and the ethical are trained and exercised together, one reinforcing the other, in a literally embodied act in which we pay attention mentally, physically, emotionally and intentionally to what arises from moment to moment in the field of possible perception within our bodies[1],[2]. While we are learning powers of attention and concentration, we also are simultaneously cultivating our powers of courage, kindness and patience. Our very bodies and minds teach ourselves these things without any preaching, lecturing or other intervention: it’s all happening within our own personal experience. We learn a new construction of experience and reality that almost completely derives from intimate subjective investigation of what we are able to perceive.

For want of a better word, we call this process mindfulness. …And there the confusion begins.

This approach is directly derived from Buddhist psychology and meditation practice and has been labeled as mindfulness practice. In the late 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn ingeniously developed, packaged and implemented a program of mindfulness-based intervention for patients with chronic disorders, which he called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)[3]. In so doing, he put this kind of introspective psychology on the map in the West, although many teachers of insight meditation and Zen had long been paving the way.

In the last 10 years, things have really taken off with mindfulness in medicine and psychology. The practice of mindfulness, just over this short period, has been applied to almost every imaginable problem and disorder, from rehabilitation of imprisoned offenders to major depression to physical disorders like cancer and multiple sclerosis[4],[5]. Some scientists see hope for mindfulness in having a direct effect upon the progress of individual physical diseases, whereas others believe it can primarily be used to help people who suffer the existential consequences of serious disease or other dire vagaries of the human condition, in order that they may begin to create new perspectives and bring new meaning into lives that seem out of control. The rapid development of technologies that permit us to examine what is happening from moment to moment in the brain also allows some degree of verifiable and objective scientific confirmation that mindfulness really does have specific effects upon how minds work[6].

Whatever the potential benefits and physiological mechanisms, this new impetus means that it has now become legitimate for physicians and psychologists to study and talk about subjective experience and begin to investigate qualities like kindness and compassion. However, it also means that physicians, psychologists and researchers must try to make sense of mindfulness, when they often may have very little or no practical experience with it, and they may often believe that “mindfulness” can be understood and dealt with just like every other concept that has come along in their studies and careers: a popular new concept is thought to be quickly understood and is then integrated into a research plan. Hypotheses are subsequently formulated and tested among a group of research participants.

One very interesting thing about mindfulness, on the other hand, is that it very clearly works in an opposite direction: first, it’s not a theory that requires testing with a group of research participants, but rather a systematic approach to investigate experience in a very personal, individual manner. The practice of mindfulness first examines what’s going on without much of any real theoretical basis; the very primary process is intentional, intimate contact with whatever perceptible experience one can be aware of in the present moment. Then based upon that cumulative, highly personal, experience, the mind and body attempt to make sense of what has been attended to.
And— as pointed out previously— mindfulness practice is not merely some cognitive-behavioral method to develop attention, but rather an approach to develop a particular kind of attention. With the kind of mindfulness that originates in Buddhist psychology and mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) derived from MBSR, it’s not about learning to concentrate and observe events like a sniper might or like some training to pay better attention in daily life, in a cognitive psychological experiment or to the quick demands of a computer game. Mindfulness is a special kind of attention that can only occur when we turn towards whatever we are perceiving, without our emotions and intentions prejudiced or biased in the process— neither turning our attention away from the object of awareness, nor trying to hang on to or control it[7]. That is where the basic attitudes of kindness, openness, tolerance, patience and courage, spoken of earlier, prove essential to this special type of direct contact with our experience.

The mindfulness of Buddhist psychology and MBI, consequently, is seen to provide a unique approach to dealing with our unruly minds residing in unruly bodies in an essentially unruly world within an unruly universe. It is a method that trains the often unruly mind and body to be still and to open up to experience in a very intimate way. Because our minds often wander to uncomfortable places, like thoughts of regret, envy or fear— and our bodies also often go along, with tensing up, becoming overstimulated or, alternatively, lethargic, exhausted or painful— this particular kind of “mindful” experience can only happen when we can develop a certain level of patience, kindness and courage as we seek to still our minds and come into close, immediate contact with whatever we are able to feel from moment to moment.

This means we are not only teaching our minds to focus and maintain contact with whatever is going on in the present moment. We are also teaching our minds and bodies to apply the skills of kindness, patience, generosity and trust to a body and mind that are always, at least partially, beyond our own control: our minds wander and get restless; our bodies become ill, agitated or otherwise uncomfortable. However, by practicing mindfulness, we may still find ourselves somehow able not only to reside in our bodies and minds, but also able to value and even vividly and richly experience them, although they are, indeed, often unruly and unsatisfactory from a perspective of having things in a certain way.

The inner exploration and investigation of experience that characterizes mindfulness thus permits the development of a new set of insights into how things— both inside and out— work, and allows for a new set of values that replace negative criticism and aversive emotions with kindness, openness and tolerance to whatever there is that we are, for any reason, unable to change. And this all comes from simply paying attention in a particular kind of way. And it is the repeated experience of our own experience within our own bodies that may bring some new kind of understanding of how our minds and the world operate.

**Western Psychology’s Reinvention of Mindfulness**

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master— that's all."

from Through the Looking Glass, by Lewis Carroll
Unfortunately, qualities such as kindness, tolerance, patience, generosity and courage – inherently ethical and socioemotional in nature – are often ignored or neglected in contemporary psychologists’ working definitions of mindfulness. One very popular definition, in fact, equates mindfulness with people’s beliefs about how absent-minded or carelessly inattentive they feel themselves to be in everyday life[8]. People who report themselves to be carelessly inattentive are labeled as low in “mindfulness”, whereas those who report themselves not to be inattentive or absent-minded in everyday life receive a high “mindfulness” rating. Such definitions of mindfulness seem a very long way from the kind of mindfulness at the foundation of Buddhist psychology, mindfulness-based interventions and associated research. These and other definitions of mindfulness not only create confusion, and distort and redefine mindfulness, but also threaten to corrupt the adoption, progress and development of mindfulness in Western psychology and medicine[9], [10], [11].

Because of academic psychology’s affinity for counting things, such definitions are also used to create measures of mindfulness based upon respondents’ self-reports. For example, people may rate themselves over 5 or 10 minutes, based upon statements within the questionnaires, on self-perceptions of inattentiveness. Researchers then make judgments – I would say erroneously – based on these brief self-ratings about the mindfulness of research participants. This assigning of degree of mindfulness takes place 1) without any real evidence even that perceptions match behavior (and there is a lot of evidence that there is a mismatch between actual behavior and self-perception when people are asked to assess themselves on positive attributes like courage and emotional self-control, so why should ability to pay attention be any different?), and 2) based upon a definition of mindfulness that is, at best, remotely related to the original Buddhist/MBI meaning of the term.

Assumptions that mindfulness can be and is measured by self-report questionnaires may create a serious additional problem: in research on personality and social psychology, questionnaires, rather than direct measures of behavior, have increasingly been relied upon as legitimate measures of psychological functioning over the last three decades[12]. About 50 years ago, 80% of personality and social psychological research was based on objective measures of behavior, whereas today, it seems that this is the case for less than 20% of studies; the other investigations primarily rely upon self-report questionnaire methods that are relatively inexpensive, quick and easy to gather data with. This means that questionnaire methods often come to define a phenomenon like “mindfulness” in psychology. In research studies and scientific meetings, respondents are then referred to as “more mindful” and “less mindful” people, solely on the basis of the answers they provide to, say, 16 brief statements that may ask participants about how poorly they think they pay attention during everyday life (e.g., whether they know where they end up when they go for a drive, or whether they forget people’s names upon first being introduced)[8]. Later, when studies are reported in the popular press and other media, such characterizations of mindfulness become the general definition of the word.

Because such measures can, therefore, create their own reality – in a world where questionnaire data are often unquestioningly assumed to reflect actual fact and not merely self-perception – this can lead, and most likely appears already to have led, to a situation in which understandings of mindfulness and its broader implications are at dramatic variance with the original Buddhist and MBI connotations.

Additionally, definitions of mindfulness that emphasize attentional aspects – to the exclusion of intentional qualities that reflect an ethical stance – neglect those very dimensions of Buddhist psychology that may offer something both unique and revolutionary to Western psychology:
examining factors that may improve attention and concentration has been an important part of academic Western psychology theory and research for at least a century. However, inextricably tying ethics to attention, in such a way that the quality and type of our attention is fully dependent upon our intentions and attitudes towards self and other, is radically new to Western thinking. If Western views of mindfulness as a mere form of attention proliferate, then experimental psychological research on mindfulness will predominantly go in that direction, and the radical implications of conjoining the cognitive and the ethical may become lost.

The major enthusiasm for mindfulness in Western psychology and medicine derives, now, from a rather substantial number of scientific studies, many indicating that MBIs can effectively alleviate the suffering of people afflicted with a broad range of conditions, for example, chronic pain, multiple sclerosis, cancer and depression, to name but a few (see also chapter 14). How exactly this is achieved is not yet scientifically established. In other words, we cannot yet be sure just what it is about the mindfulness program that is responsible for these benefits, whether it is the special relationship between participant and MBSR instructor, the special kind of exchange among participants engendered by the program, the very act of merely sitting still and reflecting upon immediate experience, the implicit qualities of kindness that arise from time to time that both body and mind appear to like, or some other factors. In fact, given the limits of current research methods, we are unlikely to know for sure for a very long time, if we ever shall.

Two things, however, should seem rather clear: 1) An eight-week period of mindfulness meditation, even with regular daily practice, is not going to create highly skilled meditators, able to maintain moment-to-moment awareness of their experience during everyday life or even consistently while performing the mindfulness exercises. Interestingly, scientific studies even indicate that there is no or very little relationship between how much benefit in well-being people gain from the course and the amount of time they spend on their homework assignments practicing mindfulness[13]. 2) Modestly improved attention to moment-to-moment experience of what one feels and perceives doesn't really explain why participants should feel better doing so. In fact, one might actually think that greater awareness of the symptoms of illness would lead to an increase, not a decrease, in distress and would interfere with a maintained focus upon immediate awareness.

Thus there would seem to be something else going on that, at least sometimes, allows close awareness of moment-to-moment experience of even unpleasant perceptions, emotions or thoughts to be appreciated and maintained. This “something else” may, in fact, be directly related to cultivation of kindness, tolerance, courage and openness to the object of awareness. However else could one keep on closely examining unsatisfactory or even painful or threatening experiences of life, like immediate perceptions or emotions related to serious illness and loss? Within the model suggested here, the true value of MBI may be in creating new perspectives, and systems of value and meaning related to various dimensions of life (e.g., attitudes towards stillness, reflection, kindness and compassion to self, others and even the inanimate world) that are directly derived from the embodied experience of concurrent, synergistic development of attentional and ethical qualities. Within the Buddhist and MBI understanding, the cultivation of each is seen as synergistically reinforced by the cultivation of the other: enhanced kindness to the uncontrollable vagaries of life makes it possible to be in more direct contact with immediate experience; greater capacity to attend to perceptible experience, on the other hand, strengthens our capacity for kindness and patience.

Such a shifting of perspectives is not accomplished overnight, nor even over weeks or months. However, one needs to begin somewhere, and eight-week MBIs seem to start the process for many people, as indicated by the rather substantial body of scientific evidence.
That such programs require continuous nurturance, support and further deepening over the years is a basic tenet of the Buddhist psychology from whence they come, but generally remains a rather alien notion to many Western psychotherapists, who often have learned to apply primarily very short-term interventions. Switching paradigms for psychotherapists would require acknowledgement on their own part that they need to take much time to develop personal skills regarding their own mindfulness practice before they work with clients or other therapists in training programs.

The resistance to this idea still seems substantial, but failure to recognize such differences in attitude towards the value of self-experience may have important consequences for the development of MBIs within Western disciplines. It will be interesting to see how things evolve. Perhaps we can, as well, attempt to apply the same tools of kindness, compassion and equanimity to observing this process, with the clearly understood knowledge that although we may be able subtly to influence it, such historical processes, like the other vagaries of our lives, may be largely out of our control. Ironically, rather than this being a fatalistic attitude, such an attitude – difficult as it is to sustain – may, indeed, help us to steer the process and our relation to it – as well as possible.
References


Paul Grossman

Paul is the Director of Research, Department of Psychosomatic Medicine, Division of Internal Medicine, University Hospital Basel, Switzerland. He has published on mindfulness in psychology and healthcare, and has been principal investigator of several investigations of mindfulness-based intervention for debilitating, long-lasting medical conditions (including multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia and sequelae of bone marrow transplantation). He also studies various aspects of relations between psychology, and respiratory and cardiovascular physiology. Dr. Grossman is Associate Editor of the journal Mindfulness, a ‘Science and Contemplative Affiliate’ of the Mind and Life Institute, teaches Mindfulness and Buddhist Psychology at the Psychological Institute of the University of Freiburg, Germany, has practiced insight meditation for many years, and completed the MBSR Internship at the UMass Medical School, Center for Mindfulness in 1998.