**The practice of mindfulness in business**

Summarises the origins and practice of mindfulness from early Buddhist times, and its uptake in business

'Mindfulness' is a term and practice that has been adopted from the Buddhist tradition, and variously adapted to different contexts in the West such as business, education, mental health and therapy. Whatever its context or level, a major part of its success is that it enables people to slow down and begin to make more informed choices in the moment about how to respond to different incoming stimuli and situations. This allows more space to arise and with that a possibility of greater connection and relationship, rather than acting out of habitual ways. On the one hand, it is a very simple technique adaptable to different circumstances, but on the other, it is an approach that is deeply embedded within a 2500 year-old tradition, and set quite specifically within a complex meditational system. Although one does not have to become a Buddhist to practise mindfulness, it is useful to have some background and understanding of its emergence, as this will give greater depth and clarity to the practice.

This paper explores the origins of 'mindfulness' in the Buddhist tradition, highlighting the underlying principles that have been found extremely useful in these different contexts.

**'Mindfulness' in the Buddhist tradition**

The origins of mindfulness lie in the very early Pali canon texts, and were the basis for the system of meditation leading to ultimate enlightenment. These texts were written down by the Buddha's disciples and were used as instruction as they spent their time deep in meditation in the forests of India. The most fundamental text relating to mindfulness is the 'The Foundations of Mindfulness' (*Satipatthana Sutta*). In this text, the Buddha instructs his disciplines in mindfulness explaining this 'is the direct path for the purification of being, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realisation of *Nibbana* – namely, the four foundations of mindfulness'.

The four foundations of mindfulness are the mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of emotions, mindfulness of thoughts, and mindfulness of the nature of reality. The process consists of a sustained inquiry into the nature of how thoughts, feelings, sensations arise in the body, how they are interconnected, and ultimately, how they are in constant flux, conditioned by multiple causes. Ultimately, one can begin to see deeply into these interconnections, and move away from those feelings and thoughts that cause suffering, and train the mind in such a way that only positive thoughts and feelings arise. Those thoughts that cause suffering are those of greed, hate or ignorance, and are dominated by grasping after pleasure, which constantly slips away.

The mindfulness practices consist of meditating upon the body, upon the nature of how the body is constructed, on how sensations, thoughts and feelings simply arise and pass away, and on how the body itself will decay and die. The four foundations of mindfulness is the classic text on this, but there are innumerable practices that arise in the different cultures in which later Buddhism is taken up. They may look different from this more restrained monastic version, but ultimately, they are all geared to the same end: namely the elimination of grasping and desire, and the ability to rest in the moment, and be present to all that is – to develop awareness to the richness of human existence in both its difficult and its joyful aspects. The key is growing insight into the way things really are, and not how we would like them to be.

**The take-up of mindfulness practices in the West**

Clearly a system of training which leads one away from suffering is to be valued, but keen observers may also begin to see that a system which leads one away from desire may be particularly helpful in a consumer society dominated and conditioned by the promulgation of desire. It may not be too far to go to say that most of the mental health issues that are so predominant in our society have been created by a system which is based upon the creation of desire through consumerism – but ultimately a desire that cannot be met, since everything is constantly in flux – leading to even greater suffering. Whilst advertising which has been in our homes for over 60 years tells us, and points to an ideal world, the reality is far from this. There is a dysfunction between what is seen on the media, and the reality of our lives, which creates a common pathology. For those with few other resources, this can cause mild to severe mental health disturbance.

Slowly, but surely these practices from 2500 years have been infiltrating into the West in different places. Buddhism came first to the UK at around the turn of the century, introduced with all the cultural and religious accretions, so was for the esoteric few, particularly in a time where the Church still exercised a considerable influence over society. Later philosophers such as Jung came to see the value of Eastern thought including both Buddhism and Taoism, and were beginning to explore this in their writings.

The influx of eastern Buddhist teachers, such as Tibetan lamas like Tarthang Tulku or the Vietnamese Thicht Nath Hanh had a profound influence on the uptake of Buddhist practices. It was in the States in the late 60s and early 70s that pioneers came to adopt and adapt some of these practices, some visiting gurus in the East, whilst others learnt the practices from the Eastern teachers. Some pioneers set up their own movements or Buddhist groups, whilst others decontextualised the practices from the Eastern culture and began to use them in different contexts. This can be found in the work of people such as Mark Epstein, Joseph Goldstein, or Reginald Ray. Early pioneers in different contexts in the UK include Maura Sills and the Karuna foundation which offers Buddhist-based psychotherapy training. The Triratna Buddhist Order (formerly Western Buddhist Order) was founded in the late 70s and was one of the earliest in the UK to adapt these practices to a Western context, and from which a large community of over a 1000 order members emerged, with a distinct and sustained training.

The explicit use of mindfulness however, although inherent in many of these other outpourings was the writing of Jon Kabat Zin, which has many outgrowths. He managed to focus on 'mindfulness' and package this in a way that was extremely accessible, and his work is the basis for much of the current 'mindfulness-based stress reduction' or 'mindfulness-based cognitive behavioural therapy' that has been used extensively in both business and healthcare.

My own work over last 15 years has been to develop practices that are suitable for businesses. This was undertaken with a team of meditation teachers, researchers and therapists called Crucible Research. We explored different ways of introducing these practices into different contexts, and surprisingly, found that the element of ritual was really important. We have developed a method called 'ethical inquiry' that has since been used to train young people in developing sustainable businesses – by inquiring not only into the nature of their own minds, they inquire into their relationship with one another, and in the environment in which they work.

**So what is 'mindfulness'?**
Given this background, then, what is mindfulness, and how might it be further developed within work? As indicated above, from the earliest Buddhist traditions, becoming 'mindful' would eventually lead to peace – *nibbana* – or heaven on earth. If one succeeded in the practice, one would be rid of all the mental afflictions that lead to suffering, and begin to see the world as it really is. One way of putting this is that it is a sustained inquiry into what it means to be a human being, and a minute examination into the arising of every sensation, emotion, and thought. In the time of the Buddha, and in most monastic traditions, this was achieved through sustained periods on a meditation cushion. Clearly the Western context does not allow for this degree of investigation, but even so, given the speed of our society, even a little of this practice can change things and allow space for something new to emerge.

Being mindful is an attitude that encourages attention and awareness in the moment, rather than being pulled to move or react in a conditioned manner. In Western cultures particularly, attention and awareness is generally focussed on outside events and objects, and little time is paid to inner experience. So a practice of mindfulness allows one to pay attention both to inner experience as it responds to outer experience and to make meaning of this from a more holistic perspective. Our reactions tend to move towards an object or thought, or away from it, but a practice of mindfulness means that it is possible to make some space for a deeper response to experience to arise. This means that it is possible for a relationship to develop that is not so much based on moving towards or pushing away from, but one which can bring both the object or person into clearer vision, and hence a better and more meaningful relationship.

Take the simple example of looking at a flower, say a rose. We can simply perceive it, and immediately cognise that it is a rose – one of many categories. Or, as we look, we can become more aware of its colour, its fragrance, its history, and perhaps even dwell on the fact that it will fade away. In this way, we may become more aware of our own feelings in relationship to the flower, how that makes us feel. What is the colour of our own emotions? What is the feeling tone of our sensations? What memories does this evoke in us? We have taken in the flower, rather than simply categorised it. We have become in relationship to it – it has affected us.

Exactly the same is true of our relationships with others. Rather than simply looking at a person, interpreting what they are saying within our mental framework in a habitual manner, we can mindfully listen to what they are saying – taking into account our sensations, our feelings, our thoughts and noticing what arises in us in relationship. We may become more aware of the other person's feelings and thoughts, and begin to see them more deeply. In other words, we become more present to them, and to ourselves in the moment of connection.

This is easier said than done in a society that is conditioned to move quickly on from one experience to another. Indeed now, since we communicate so much through the internet a large amount of our time is spent in processing experience merely through the eye. Thus the usual pathways of sensation are bypassed, and the experience is narrowed down to a cognitive idea of life, rather than the full-blown version with its emotions, sensations, sounds. Indeed, it may well be argued that the reason for so much pathology in society is down to this phenomenon – living in a virtual world, means that we have lost a sense of touch, warmth, sound, life.

What mindfulness offers is a simple and pragmatic method for reconnecting with this world – or at the very least recognising what we have lost. Whilst the practice can take intention and effort, most people would agree that the benefits, simply in terms of making one's life easier and happier, far outweigh the efforts involved in learning and practising. Paradoxically, even though the practice slows down experience, one actually tends to achieve more – a clear example of less is more!

**How to practise mindfulness and ethical inquiry**

As I have indicated there are many ways of practising mindfulness, but in a certain sense they all focus on bringing attention to the current experience in terms of sensation, emotion, and thoughts. A daily practice of even 15 minutes can enhance considerably one's experience – and at the very least will give an indication of how one's mind processes experience. Sitting in meditation posture is extremely helpful, as it helps the body settle down, and the mind stop its endless chatter, but the practice can equally be done by sitting on a chair with one's feet firmly on the ground.

The Crucible research method involves several different stages, most importantly, 'creating the reflective ground' being the first, followed by practices which we called 'embodiment', and which would consist of bringing a group or community more clearly in contact with one another. The research clearly demonstrated that ritual was also a very important part of the process, and our recommendation was that workplaces would include this aspect. We could say that this is a process of making things sacred.

**Mindfulness and innovation**

Whilst it is counter-cultural to slow things down, much more may be achieved. The trick is that innovation arises from ideas – ideas arise freely within a spacious mind – the speed of the internet and life means that we often have no space to develop these ideas and therefore we operate most of the time in a cauldron of pressure. Paradoxically, mindfulness allows us to be more and more in line with the nature of the environment, and the people with whom we interact, this way, ideas are generated that flow with the way things really are, and not with the way in which we, or others would like them to be. Just try it!