

What is *mindfulness* anyway?

January 11, 2018

I'm going to guess that you're here because there is something about mindfulness that interests you. Would you agree? What are some reasons that brought you here tonight? (...) As you can see, there are a range of reasons for learning about mindfulness. And that begs the question, what *is* mindfulness, actually? Can anyone suggest a definition? Or maybe some characteristics of mindfulness? It's hard to pin down, isn't it.

There's a widespread lack of clarity in how people understand the term *mindfulness*. There's good reason for that. In recent years, mindfulness has become a fad, and while I'm excited that there is so much interest in it, it's inevitable with fads that people will jump on the bandwagon, using the term without really knowing what it means. We've all seen what happens when exotic concepts are introduced into western culture: they become hijacked by common misuse and redefinition. (We still frequently see "Zen and the Art of xxx," workshops about "tantric sex," the encouragement to "become one with the flower..." and so on.) The term *mindfulness* had a very specific and buddhist meaning when it was first used in that context in a publication in 1910, but now it seems to mean all sorts of things that are only tenuously related to meditation.

Let's look briefly at where this use of the term came from. *Mindfulness* was originally used in a 1910 publication by one of the first western Buddhist scholars, T. W. Rhys Davids, to translate a very specific Pali word, *sati*. (*Pali* is the language the Buddha spoke, and is related to Sanskrit. The first body of Buddhist texts were written in Pali, and are known as the *Pali Canon*.) It's not important now to understand what *sati* means, but suffice it to say that Rhys Davids tried out different words for several years before settling on *mindfulness*, because the Pali term has no English correlate. Once he settled on (and published) *mindfulness* as a translation of *sati*, the word became closely associated with early Buddhist practices. There followed 80 years in which this Buddhist sense of the word was translated from English into other languages, even eventually circling back on itself. (The Japanese word for *mindfulness* is *main-do-furu-nesu*, just a Japanization of the English word that was introduced back to Asia—2500 years after the concept it was trying to translate had been well established there.) As if this weren't confusing enough, as Buddhism gained popularity in the west, texts from other Buddhist traditions were translated into English, and the word *mindfulness* was applied to words from Tibetan,

Zen, Chan, Thai Buddhism, and others. These terms from other Buddhist eras and schools each evolved in their own time and culture, and while they had similarities to each other conceptually, the specific meanings were by no means the same. So now you had *mindfulness* meaning different things depending on which school of Buddhism you're come from. Then in 1990 John Kabat-Zinn chose the term as a defining word in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and *mindfulness* became a household term. It is now the go-to word for secular meditation programs and systems such as are now found all through the health system, in various psycho- and cognitive therapy situations, even in business and military training! So the definition of *mindfulness* varies according to each specific context in which it is used. At this time, common use of *mindfulness* no longer implies a Buddhist context, which is how I'll be using it too: in a non-theistic, all inclusive manner.

Even assuming we have agreed on a definition of *mindfulness*, there are still several specific things that one might be referring to when using that single word.

For example, when someone says “mindfulness” they may mean *mindful awareness*. Mindful awareness is a particular way of paying attention to something. But they may be talking about a *temporary state* of mindful awareness (that is, the degree to which your attention is mindful right at this moment), or they could be talking about one's *baseline level* of mindful awareness. Baseline mindfulness is how mindful you are in general, when you aren't intentionally trying to be mindful. Over the course of this year, you will all see an increase in your own baseline mindful awareness.

Another use of *mindfulness* refers to what researchers have come to call *Mindful Awareness Practices*, or MAPs. MAPs are specific exercises that systematically elevate a person's *base level* of mindfulness (in the sense of *mindful awareness*). This sterile-sounding acronym arose because scientific and medical research into mindfulness was burgeoning, and there was a need to establish consistent definitions from research project to research project. Here in this social and instructive situation, I will usually call a MAP a “meditation technique” or a “mindfulness technique” (Note that “meditation” in the context of Unified Mindfulness refers to the application of MAPs in general, and “meditation technique” refers to a specific Mindful Awareness Practice.) Just to clarify, mindful *states* can happen spontaneously as a result of focused activities such as sports or painting, etc, but because these activities do not *systematically* elevate the base level of a person's mindfulness, they aren't MAPs. For example, running is not a meditation technique, *unless* you are intentionally applying a technique as you run for the purpose of elevating your base level of mindfulness.

Typically people who started meditating years ago (before the fad exploded into everyday life) will assume that mindfulness techniques are limited to the early Buddhist forms described in the Pali Canon (perhaps because that was Rhys David's original use). I'm going to define mindfulness more generally, so it will include many other styles of meditation.

Another meaning of *mindfulness* could be the *mindfulness path*. A *mindfulness path* is an intentional and organized regimen of meditation techniques designed to increase an individual's baseline mindfulness, sort of analogous to a health or fitness regime. Just knowing a technique doesn't mean you're on a path to elevated mindfulness. You need to use that technique appropriately, effectively, and consistently in order to see change. That's what I'll mean whenever I say something about "being on the path."

Finally (at least for tonight), there is the *Unified Mindfulness System*, which is what I will be basing the direction of this series on. Unified Mindfulness is a self-contained, comprehensive, carefully formulated system of meditation techniques, designed to provide all that is needed to effect revolutionary positive change in individuals, and as a result, in society. Let's just say that once more: *Unified Mindfulness is a self-contained, comprehensive, carefully formulated system of meditation techniques, designed to provide all that is needed to effect revolutionary positive change in individuals, and as a result, in society.* (Didn't know that's what you were getting into, did you!) Unified Mindfulness is just one of myriad mindfulness/meditation systems, many of which are just as effective. UM does not claim to be the only or best system. It is just the system I know and can teach. UM does have the advantage of including in it the core of probably every other valid system you will come across, so if you choose in the end to use a different system on your path, you will already have the basic understanding and skills to make a transition easily.

So that's a brief overview of why no one really knows what they mean when they say "mindfulness," and (what **I** mean when I use these various terms).

I can sum up the topic of terminology like this: In this Contemplative Odyssey series, I will be teaching about a broad range of *meditation techniques (Mindful Awareness Practices)*, any of which individually have the potential to raise your *baseline level of mindful awareness*, and which, taken together, constitute the *Unified Mindfulness system*. Your *mindfulness path* will look different from everyone else's in this room, but we will all have in common the intentional application of techniques

in order to increase our *baseline mindful awareness*. What and how much of what I teach over the next year you choose to incorporate into your path is up to you.

Perhaps you're wondering why I am making such a big deal about "raising your baseline level of mindful awareness" (which I am now going to refer to simply as "mindfulness"). I'm going to make a big claim here: I claim that increasing your baseline level of mindfulness can help you to do or be anything that you really want.

Do you want to be less stressed? That's a common use of mindfulness.

Do you want to stop smoking? Mindfulness can help with that.

Want to do better at school? It can help with that, too.

How about making more money? Mindfulness can *probably* help with that, and it can certainly help with your relationship to that desire.

Mindfulness can help you become a better athlete.

And can make your sex life more satisfying.

Are you looking for the love of your life? Well, mindfulness can't materialize the love of your life, but when you *do* get together with someone, it can *absolutely* help with cultivating and maintaining a healthy and fulfilling relationship.

Are you seeking to deepen your relationship with God? That is certainly possible with mindfulness.

Or to know your true self better? For sure.

Can mindfulness make you kinder or more generous, etc? Yes, indeed.

What about curing your medical condition? There are some situations in which mindfulness can in fact change your physiology. For example, reducing blood pressure through reducing stress, or being able to deal with pain. But mindfulness is not magic. We still need to go to the doctor sometimes, and all of us will eventually live with the effects of sickness or old age. However, mindfulness can absolutely reduce the amount that you suffer as a result of diseases or conditions, and it can help you to respond appropriately and with ease to whatever physical issues life throws at you. Mindfulness can help you to be honestly deeply happy, even in the midst of the worst of physical or emotional situations.

Does any of that sound appealing? Put succinctly, mindfulness can help reduce suffering and increase fulfillment; it can help you get to know yourself on the deepest level and improve your objective behavior; and it can release the infinite compassion that is available within each one of us. Those are pretty good reasons for increasing your baseline level of mindful attention.

I've just spent a lot of time defining the term *mindfulness* broadly, but I sort of skipped over an important definition. I said *mindfulness* can refer to mindful awareness, which is a specific way of paying attention, but I didn't say what that particular way was. I'm going to give you a sneak peak now, and in a few weeks we're going to jump into the deep end exploring this definition through the use of some specific techniques.

Mindful awareness, as defined in Unified Mindfulness, is a set of three skills. Yes, skills. As in things you can learn to do, and that improve with practice. There's not really anything mystical or esoteric about mindfulness. It is a set of skills that you can master, and the deeper you go with them, the more profound your experiences will be of the benefits we just talked about. These are the three skills:

1. Concentration power
2. Sensory clarity
3. Equanimity

Concentration power is the ability to focus your attention on whatever you *choose* to focus your attention on, for as long as you want to keep it focused there. Not so mystical, eh? And really helpful in just about every aspect of your life.

Sensory clarity is the ability to know what it is you are focusing on: to be able to detect and distinguish with increasing detail the actual, real-time experience of any particular moment. We are only aware of anything through the doors of our senses: hearing, seeing, feeling, thinking, having emotions. Sensory clarity is the ability to experience each of the senses directly, and to untangle the various elements that get knotted up into unmanageable internal experiences. Sensory clarity is being able to see things *as they really are*.

Equanimity is being able to experience these senses (including thoughts and emotions) without having to fight them or hang on to them. It's the ability to allow whatever is happening to happen,

internally so that we can respond and act internally *and externally* in ways appropriate to the actual situation.

I will speak about these three skills *ad nauseum*, so don't worry if what I've just said didn't make a lot of sense or doesn't stick. It won't be long before you'll be able to explain them to your friends with the expertise of someone who has experienced and understood what they are talking about. And you'll be experiencing the benefits of what these skills can do for you. I hope you'll be able to join us for the entire Odyssey.