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What Is Mindfulness?

It's hard to define exactly what we mean by mindfulness – it's more like a rainbow than a single colour. Kabat-Zinn speaks of it as a way of paying attention: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally[1 (p. 4)] to whatever arises in the field of your experience, and that is a good starting point. Mindfulness is a way of paying attention 'on purpose'. When you're mindful, you know that you're mindful. You're aware of what you're thinking, what you're feeling and what you're sensing in your body, and you know that you're aware of these things. Much of the time we're just not aware in that sense.

Take the case of James, who is driving to an important meeting for which he's late. He's feeling tense, hassled and not particularly mindful. A long line of cars has already built

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up as he approaches the traffic lights on a busy junction. Just as the line begins to close up at the red signal, another car races up from behind him, squeezes past at the last moment and takes James's place in the queue. James is now precisely one car's length further back from the lights than he would have been had that car not pushed in. In fact, he's about 4.2 metres further back and, at an average urban speed of around 15 miles per hour (40.234 metres per second), that means he'll be more or less one tenth of a second later for his meeting.

But it doesn't feel like that to James. In that moment, from his perspective, it feels like a complete disaster. 'Now I'm going to be *really* late. People are so rude, so pushy! Oh . . . !!!' His shoulders tighten, his hands clench on the wheel and his mind begins to race. 'What a mess! How could I be so late? They'll never take me seriously. This is *so* unprofessional . . . I *hate* being late . . . What a pig – pushing in front like that . . . ' His stomach starts to churn and he can feel heartburn coming on. His whole body starts to tighten up and he begins to sweat. What James is actually doing here is setting up the conditions for a not very successful meeting. He's going to be in pretty poor shape when he walks into the meeting room a few minutes late (and one tenth of a second later than he would have been had that car not pushed in front).

Had James been paying mindful attention to his experience, had he been even a little mindful at any point in that unfolding scenario, things might have gone quite differently. He might, for example, have become aware of the way he was gripping the steering wheel. He might have found, for instance, that it was almost painful and that the tension spread from there up his arms and into his shoulders. Bringing some mindful attention to that, he could have deliberately loosened his grip on the wheel. His shoulders might then have softened

and his stomach begun to settle. Taking a few deep breaths, he might have thought, 'Ah well, one car in front – that won't hurt too much. Now, how shall I best handle this? Will I apologize for being late or just carry on regardless?'

Or he might have become aware of how he was feeling. 'Gosh I'm angry! Wow! My stomach's really churning . . . like a washing machine! OK – let's just chill a bit. A few deep breaths . . . ' Or he might have become aware of his thoughts. 'Oh yes . . . Here I go again. Catastrophizing. I'm a few minutes late and I write off the whole meeting . . . OK . . . Time for a few deep breaths . . . Now how am I going to handle this meeting? What would be my most effective opening . . . ?' With some mindfulness training, James might have learned to bring a different quality of awareness to his thoughts, feelings or body sensations at times of distress. This capacity to know what we're thinking, feeling or sensing as it is going on is what we might call the 'metacognitive' dimension of mindfulness.

Metacognition refers to our knowledge about our own cognitive processes or anything related to them.[2] In the context of mindfulness, metacognition extends into the domains of feelings and body-sensations as well. All of these – thoughts, feelings and body-sensations – are experienced in the mind, and metacognition is the mind aware *that* it is thinking, *that* it is feeling, *that* it is sensing. Any one of these metacognitive elements of mindfulness can enter our experience at any time and transform it. Had James become aware that he was feeling a pain in his hands and shoulders from gripping the wheel, or that he was angry, or that he was catastrophizing, he would have begun to have a choice around where things might go next. He would have been able to make wiser choices, and one of the purposes of mindfulness practice is to significantly increase the chance of that happening. Had James been in a

position to deploy any one of the metacognitive skills as the car pushed in front of him at the traffic lights, his meeting would have been far more effective – and more profitable for his firm.

Another quality of mindful attention, according to Kabat-Zinn's definition, is that it is rooted 'in the present moment'. So often our attention is oriented towards the future or the past. Imagine the case of Emily, walking from the Tube station to her office on a sunny spring morning. She's completely oblivious to the sensation of the first rays of early summer sun on her face. Nor does she catch the fresh fragrance of a shrub she passes that has just burst into flower. The sense of vitality and well-being that might have come from either of these experiences is lost to her. Instead she's fixated on her to-do list for the next week. Not that she needs to be – she could recite it by heart. She's been over it again and again and again ever since she woke up, but there she goes again, rehearsing the tasks ahead of her.

Emily thinks of herself as conscientious. She's a good worker, focused on her job. But the way she's needlessly and unproductively rehearsing her to-do list – checking its details maybe for the hundredth time that morning – keeps her from refreshing herself in simple ways. She'll arrive at work in good time and get on with her tasks efficiently, but her performance won't be quite as good as it might have been. Preoccupied with her to-do list, she's lost some really useful opportunities to refresh herself and to broaden her mental and emotional horizons. But more than that. Preoccupied with her to-do list, or with her attention wandering into the past or future, Emily isn't as present and wholehearted in her approach to her work as she thinks she is.

Sometimes her attention wanders into the past: 'That meeting last week . . . If only I'd taken the chance to make

that point, and if only Will hadn't spoken in that way, and maybe it would have been better if I'd worn those other shoes . . . ' Or it drifts into the future: 'What will I make for dinner tonight? And should we book that holiday before prices rise again, and what will I wear tomorrow . . . ?' And so Emily's attention runs. She thinks she's diligently getting on with her tasks but some of the time it's as if she's put her mind onto a kind of 'automatic pilot' and let it just run on as it does.

Maybe you've had the experience of driving 30 miles down the road and then suddenly coming to – 'Oh gosh, we're here already. How did I do that? I've been miles away . . . ' You were thinking, or planning, or dreaming and you were simply driving on automatic pilot, performing quite complex tasks – changing gears, judging distances, braking, indicating – without any conscious awareness that you were doing them. It seems to work. And because it seems to work we put more and more of our lives onto automatic pilot.

When we were really young each moment was fresh and new and we were right there for each experience. But as we grow older it all starts to feel completely familiar and we begin to do more and more of it automatically and that seems to be OK. But is it? With our attention set on automatic pilot we miss things. Certainly, we miss the well-being elements that we might get from noticing the first blossoms of spring or the vibrant shades of the autumn leaves. But there are other things that we might miss as well. That particular tone in your child's greeting in the morning that says he's being bullied at school and somehow can't talk about it right now. But you miss it, because you're just doing family breakfast on automatic pilot. Or that flicker of expression on a colleague's face that says that there's something important going on at home that she really needs to talk about. Or that glance in a client's

eye that might have opened a whole new dimension to the negotiation.

On automatic pilot we miss things, and some of what we miss might have a significant impact on our performance at work. But more than that: at the deepest level, as Kabat-Zinn has pointed out,[3] if life is just one moment of experience, followed by another moment of experience, followed by another moment of experience, and then another, and another . . . and then you're dead, well, wouldn't it be good to show up for some of those experiences? To show up for your life – while you still have it? To pay attention – in the present moment? The capacity to come out of automatic pilot a bit more often, to place your attention where you want it to be and to keep it there for longer is a known outcome of mindfulness training.[4]

One of the really intriguing studies on the relationship between mindfulness training and attentional effectiveness was carried out by Jha and Stanley with a group of US Marines.[5] Their findings featured in *Joint Force Quarterly*, the advisory journal of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. A group of 31 Marines about to be deployed to Iraq and undergoing 'stress-inoculation' training, which helps habituate them to the extreme mental rigours of combat, received an eight-week mindfulness course (a control group of 17 did not receive the course). Jha and Stanley then measured the protective influence of the mindfulness training on the Marines' working memory. Her findings suggested that, just as daily physical exercise leads to physical fitness, engaging in mindfulness exercises on a regular basis improved the Marines' 'mind-fitness' by extending their working memory under stress. That, she claims,[6] safeguards them against distraction and emotional reactivity and lets them maintain a mental workspace that ensures quick and considered decisions and action

plans. Besides offering some protection to combatants from post-traumatic stress and other anxiety disorders, the mindfulness training enhanced the clarity of thinking needed for soldiers fighting in challenging and ambiguous counter-insurgency zones.

For Jha, this study showed that mindfulness training might help anyone who must maintain peak performance in the face of extremely stressful circumstances: the emergency services, relief workers, trauma surgeons, professional and Olympic athletes and so on. But actually very few people in the workplace are immune from periods of extreme demand these days and it's hard to imagine anyone whose work and productivity would not benefit from an increased capacity to deploy their attention in ways that their tasks require.

The last quality of mindful awareness that Kabat-Zinn draws attention to is that it is 'non-judgemental'. This doesn't mean that if you are mindful you don't make judgements or that you give up the powers of discrimination. Far from it. But it does involve dropping a certain kind of judgementalism, especially the tendency constantly to judge ourselves in a critical light. Many of us have a habit of judging ourselves that disguises itself as an attempt to help us lead better lives and be better people. But actually it's a kind of irrational tyranny that can never be satisfied.[7] The mindful approach, by contrast, is to let yourself experience what you're experiencing without censoring it, without blocking things out or constantly wishing they were other than they are. Mindfulness training encourages us to bring an attitude of warm, kindly curiosity to whatever we experience – in thoughts, feelings and body-sensations – from moment to moment. It enables us to let what *is* the case *be* the case.

Imagine the case of Laura, who is based in the London office of her company and has been asked to present her

team's findings to a group of senior people in New York by video link. She hates doing that. Standing alone in the video suite, facing an inert camera and being seen by a number of people whose names she barely knows, 3500 miles away. It makes her nervous. But Laura thinks she ought not to feel nervous. It's just a camera, after all. She's done video-link presentations before. 'It's so stupid being nervous', she thinks, adding an additional layer of harsh, self-critical judgement onto an already difficult experience.

When the video-link goes live Laura is suddenly overcome with nerves. Her face flushes and, trying to suppress the flush, she freezes and fluffs her opening lines. Struggling to catch up with herself she stumbles again and again. At the end, after a less than satisfactory videoconference, she dashes for the lavatory and bursts into tears. 'I'm just rubbish', she tells herself. 'I can't do this job. I'm just no good – I'm not up to it . . . ' None of that is true and Laura stays in her position, but her confidence has been seriously undermined and it takes her weeks to recover.

With a little mindfulness training it might have gone differently. Taking a more mindful, more accepting approach to her feelings and sensations, Laura might have noticed the feeling of butterflies in her stomach. 'I'm a bit nervous about this', she might have thought, and taken a few moments simply to acknowledge what was going on for her – that tightness in her jaw, the tension at her shoulders. Exploring these sensations and investigating her feelings with an attitude of kindly curiosity, she might have said to herself: 'OK – I'm nervous. I can be with that. I'll just do the best I can with this.' Planting her feet firmly on the floor of the video suite, rooted and upright, accepting herself as she actually found herself, a deeper confidence might have emerged and the videoconference might have been quite different.

Learning to pay attention in this way – on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally – participants in mindfulness courses begin to experience a fundamental shift in perspective. They learn to dis-identify from the contents of their consciousness – their thoughts, feelings and body sensations – and to view their moment-by-moment experience with greater clarity and objectivity.

This capacity to shift perspective has been described as a form of *reperceiving*.[8] Rather than being immersed in the drama of their personal narratives or life stories, participants on MBSR courses learn the skill of standing back a little and witnessing what is going on for them. They learn that the phenomena that arise in practices such as meditation are distinct from the mind contemplating them.[9 (p. 146)] This skill of reperceiving brings about a subtle turning about in consciousness in which what was previously 'subject' now becomes 'object'.

Taking the example of Laura and her experience of the video presentation, before learning mindfulness she was simply nervous. You might say she was in a bit of a state. But she didn't acknowledge that to herself and it coloured her subjective experience quite dramatically. Had she been more mindful, she might have reperceived the experience. Some elements of her nervousness would then have become an objective experience she could attend to. Noticing the butterflies in her stomach, for example, she might have attended to that with warmth and curiosity. 'Wow, I'm a bit nervous. My stomach's really fluttering – gosh, it really *is* fluttering – so that's what they mean when they talk of "butterflies in the stomach" . . . What a strange feeling . . . ' That shift in perspective would have allowed her to enter the video suite in a very different mode of mind – an 'approach' mode of mind, characterized by warmth, acceptance and curiosity – and she

would probably have handled the situation much more effectively. Had Laura been able to enjoy the benefits of a mindfulness course put on in her workplace, she and her company would both have experienced considerable benefit.

This capacity to reperceive, although it needs to be learned and is something we can consciously train in, is simply a continuation of the way we naturally develop. As we grow from infancy we develop an increasing capacity for objectivity about our internal experience. To illustrate this developmental process – one of increasing objectivity over time – Shapiro and colleagues describe how, on a mother's birthday, her eight-year-old son gives her flowers, while her three-year-old gives her his favourite toy. That is developmentally appropriate. The three-year-old is naturally caught in the limits of his perspective. For him, the world is still largely 'subjective'. It is an extension of his self and, as a result, he can't differentiate his own desires from those of his mother. As he develops, however, a shift in perspective occurs and there is an ever-increasing capacity to sense the perspective of others. He begins to see that his mother's needs and wishes are different from his own. What was previously subject – his identification with his mother – has become an object which he now realizes he is separate from. This is the dawning of empathy – the awareness of his mother as a separate person with her own needs and desires.[8] One aspect of our development from infancy to adulthood is an unconscious increase in our capacity to reperceive. We don't know that we're doing it, but as we grow we become more objective in certain respects. Mindfulness practice continues this natural process, but now at a conscious level. With mindfulness training we can begin consciously to develop an increasing capacity for objectivity with regard to our internal and external experience.[8]

This 'reperceiving' is not the same as detachment. It's not about distancing yourself from your experience to the point of apathy or numbness. Instead, the experience of mindful reperceiving gives rise to a deep knowing: a greater intimacy with whatever arises moment by moment. Mindfulness allows for a degree of distance from your experience in the sense that you become clearer about what it is you're experiencing. But this doesn't translate into a disconnection or dissociation. Instead, it allows you to experience the changing flow of your mental and physical experiences without identifying with them or clinging to them. Ultimately, this gives rise to a profound, penetrative, non-conceptual seeing into the nature of mind and world.[10 (p. 146)] Rather than leading to a cold detachment, this lets you connect more intimately with your moment-to-moment experience, allowing it to rise and fall and change naturally, as it does. You begin to experience *what is* instead of a commentary or story *about* what is. Rather than creating apathy or indifference, this helps you to experience greater richness, texture and depth – from moment to moment. Shapiro and colleagues speak of this as a form of 'intimate detachment', and that captures both sides of the experience.[8]

The shift from unmindfulness to mindfulness – from unconsciously clinging to, or pushing away from, every moment of experience to the state of intimate objectivity around that experience – is almost alchemical in its subtlety. A kind of transmutation takes place that allows what was once threatening or compulsively desirable to become much more tolerable and effectively manageable, maybe even interesting and vital. But this shift *is* subtle. There are pitfalls and bear traps all along the way as people begin to take up mindfulness practice for themselves. The unwary can find themselves forcing their attention in an attempt to gain concentration, or

alienating themselves from the natural flow of their emotions in an attempt to gain some objectivity. The tendency to impose another framework upon your existing pattern of experience when you first hear about mindfulness is quite natural. But mindfulness doesn't work like that. It can only arise as a product of mindfulness practice. It can't be imposed or plugged into an existing framework; for mindfulness practice to be effective it needs to be taught by an experienced mindfulness teacher.

As much as anything, mindfulness is caught – not taught. The lived, embodied experience of the mindfulness instructor, as witnessed by those he or she is teaching, is as much a source of learning as the techniques imparted. The instructor's tone of voice and mindful attention, their attitude of kindly acceptance and their openness to the enormous variety of their students' reported experience is a hugely important part of their teaching.

All the clinical trials that have shown mindfulness to be effective have been conducted on groups that have been led by trained, experienced mindfulness teachers. As the results of these trials filter out into the wider society and as mindfulness comes to be taken up more and more enthusiastically – especially in organizational environments – there is a real danger that inexperienced HR and Learning and Development personnel will be asked to lead groups based on their own very limited experience. The authors of *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*[11] suggest that people leading mindfulness courses should have at least two years of formal daily mindfulness practice behind them. These days in the United Kingdom there are several good-quality mindfulness teacher-training programmes available[i] and there are valuable free-access resources, such as the 'Good Practice Guidance for Teaching Mindfulness-Based Courses'.[ii] Without

adequately trained teachers, mindfulness courses might even be counterproductive.

With all of these caveats in mind, it is time to look at what we actually mean by mindfulness practice and that is the subject of the next chapter. Before then, though, we leave this chapter with a short meditation – an eating meditation. But we're not going to eat very much at all. In fact we'll eat just one raisin – mindfully.

Try this:

The Raisin Exercise

Get hold of a single raisin and find somewhere quiet where you can sit for 10 or 15 minutes and give your full attention to this exercise.

1. Holding
   - Let the raisin rest in your palm. Take a few moments to become aware of its weight.
   - Then, become aware of its temperature – any warmth or coolness it may have.
2. Looking
   - Give the raisin your full attention, really looking.
   - Become aware of the pattern of colour and shape that the raisin makes as it rests on your palm – almost like an abstract painting.
3. Touching
   - Aware of the sense of movement in your muscles as you do this, pick up the raisin between the thumb and forefinger of your other hand.

- Explore the outside texture of the raisin as you roll it very gently between your thumb and forefinger.
- Squeeze it ever so slightly and notice that this might give you a sense of its interior texture.
- Notice that you can feel this difference just with your thumb and forefinger – the *interior* texture and the *exterior* texture.

4. Seeing
   - Lift the raisin to a place where you can really focus on it and begin to examine it in much more detail.
   - See its highlights and shadows and how these change as it moves in the light.
   - Notice how facets of it appear and disappear – how it may seem to have ridges and valleys and how these may shift and change.
5. Smelling
   - Again aware of the sense of movement in your muscles, begin to move the raisin very slowly towards your mouth.
   - As it passes by your nose you may become aware of its fragrance. With each inhalation, really explore that fragrance.
   - Become aware of any changes that may be taking place now in your mouth or stomach – any salivation, perhaps.
6. Placing
   - Bring the raisin up to your lips. Explore the delicate sensation of touch here.
   - Now place it in your mouth and don't chew.

- Just let it rest on your tongue, noticing any very faint flavour that may be there.
- Feel the contact it makes with the roof of the mouth, perhaps.
- Now move it to between your back teeth and just let it rest there – again without chewing.
- Notice any urges or impulses in the body.

7. Tasting
   - Now take a single bite. Just one. Notice any flavour.
   - Then take another bite. Notice any change in flavour.
   - Then another bite, and another.
8. Chewing
   - Now slowly, very slowly, chew.
   - Be aware of sound, of texture, of flavour and of change.
   - Keep chewing in this way, very slowly, until there is almost nothing left to chew.
9. Swallowing
   - When there is almost nothing left to chew, swallow. See if you can be aware of the intention to swallow as it first arises.
10. Finishing
    - As best you can, follow what is left of the raisin as it moves down towards your stomach and you lose sight of it altogether.
    - How does your body feel now as you've completed that exercise?
    - What did you notice that you might not have been aware of before?

Notes

i See Appendix 4.
ii See Appendix 1.

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