

Mindfulness Teachers; Do you Practice what you Preach?

Introduction

Mindfulness as a technique and a lifestyle has been around in the East for a few thousand years. Over the past 10 years Western society has been bombarded by the term Mindfulness. The popularity of Mindfulness has led to it being scrutinised as well as taken out of context. This paper attempts to find the meaning of Mindfulness by contrasting different perspectives from Western psychological to Eastern philosophical traditions. Using Mindfulness as a therapy has been seen to be highly effective (Craigie, 2010). However, Mindfulness-based therapies differ from the traditional “talk therapies” which have been prominent in counselling over the past few decades. The most important distinction between the two is that Mindfulness-based therapies are experience-based and rely on the client to regularly practice the techniques given to them. Clearly there needs to be a solid education body which is capable of providing adequate education about Mindfulness-based therapy. Unfortunately there is little opportunity to study Mindfulness-based therapy in Australia, which raises questions about teacher competence and standards of practice. This paper also suggests that all Mindfulness teachers, through practice as well as education, develop a full and complete understanding of the true essence of Mindfulness-based therapies. Rather than seeing Mindfulness as another tool, Mindfulness teachers should try to live and embrace a mindful life so that they can truly equip themselves to inspire their clients.

Popularity of Mindfulness

Mindfulness has morphed in popularity over the past 10 years (Hays, 2008). Due to its functionality and adaptivity Mindfulness exists for children, stress, lawyers and in the business fields (Shapiro, 2009). Mindfulness has been termed the new buzzword for many individuals working in the therapeutic field. Although there has been a lot of talk about Mindfulness (as well as a lot of conferences provided about Mindfulness) there has not been much action or actual practice of Mindfulness amongst professionals. This could be determined a contradiction. Mindfulness is an experiential practice whereby textbooks probably need to be a secondary method of knowledge acquisition (Segal,

Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). The term Mindfulness requires further exploration to help with any confusion surrounding the term.

Western Definition of Mindfulness

Kabat-Zinn (1994) has defined Mindfulness as paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally. Mindfulness has also been defined as an open and receptive attention to and awareness of what is occurring in the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2004). Harris (2009) has defined mindfulness as paying attention with flexibility, openness, and curiosity. These definitions convey a sense of functionality to the experience of Mindfulness. These definitions also give the idea of what one will experience whilst practising Mindfulness.

Eastern Definition of Mindfulness

In Sanskrit (the language of the Yogic tradition), Mindfulness (*smṛti*) is currently defined as being a witness to yourself by always being aware of what you are doing; or self-remembering (Rao, N. G., *personal communication*, December 6, 2011). The Buddhist Pali language defines Mindfulness (*sati* or *satipatthana*), as remembering or an activity that is experienced (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Both definitions talk about awareness and take away the self from the thought or ego concept¹. This is rather like the notion that one is not the sum of their thoughts.

Contrast from East and West

The above Eastern and Western definitions of Mindfulness bear differences and similarities. These definitions differ in construct, with Eastern possibly being narrower in context and Western typically as broader. The Eastern definitions leave the reader with a phrase more open to personal interpretation and may be more simplistic. Nevertheless, the Western definitions of Mindfulness could have a more goal-orientated

¹ There has been a recent debate about the origin of Mindfulness definitions and some scholars believe that these aren't the original definitions. Mindfulness should probably be defined as *shakshi bhavati* (Rao, N. G., *personal communication*, December 6, 2011) which means to be an eyewitness.

approach to it. Western definitions may make suggestive comments (e.g., paying attention; on purpose) that may dissuade the Mindfulness practitioner if they do not perceive they are doing what is required of them. Analysing the way in which some Western operational definitions of Mindfulness have been developed, it could seem that attainment of Mindfulness is the end goal to be reached. Striving for achievement is like cognising repeatedly "I want these thoughts to stop". A message such as this runs counter to the essence of the Mindfulness approach as the individual is judging and not staying with the present moment.

Difficulties Defining Mindfulness

Mindfulness has been defined amongst many Eastern contemplative traditions. Mindfulness has also been defined by a number of authors working intensively in the field of Mindfulness-based treatment approaches. It is important to note that it is not really possible to define a state of experience and it is also against the true essence of Mindfulness for anyone to define it. This is because one must experience Mindfulness for themselves and this is done whilst practising. The intellect and the ego may conceptually understand Mindfulness, however, how does the individual know whether they are in the present moment or not? The textbooks may falter in that if one is reading about Mindfulness, they aren't actually experiencing the present moment.

Towards a New Definition of Mindfulness

Gunaratna (2013) suggests that Mindfulness involves impartial watchfulness, non-conceptual awareness, egoless alertness and participatory observation. With the practice of Mindfulness, attention becomes self-regulated and one becomes more fully aware of their thought patterns (Bishop, Lau, Shapiro, Carlson, Anderson, Carmody, Segal, Abbey, Speca, Velting & Devins, 2004). It is evident that at the heart of both Eastern and Western definitions of Mindfulness that a self-observation construct is involved, as well as absence of self judgment. When one is able to see things, as they really are, before discerning and labeling their thoughts, similarities amongst the East and West become more evident. No matter the definition one may be better able to develop a level of experiential insight into their true nature.

Perhaps a more functional definition of Mindfulness would be to use less jargon and simplify some of the terms. Pages can be written about one word, which can be such a complex term taken out of context. A definition of Mindfulness probably should convey the experiential nature of the practice as well as absence of any desire for achievement. Sri K. Patthabhi Jois a world famous yoga teacher would always say to his students, "practice, practice, practice all is coming" (2010). This explanation could fit the above requirements in providing a relevant operational definition of Mindfulness which could help traditional talk therapists to explain Mindfulness. Defining Mindfulness could be seen to be like defining the indefinable. Perhaps one could simply define Mindfulness as Mindfulness is (Whitehead, 2013).

Traditional Talk Therapy

Talk therapy has been traditionally taught by textbook and has a vastly theoretical base. Some profound theories have been proposed and expanded upon over the past 130 years of Psychological history. A short and incomplete list of these theories includes Freud/Yung (Psychoanalytic therapy), Ellis (Rational Emotive Behaviour therapy) and Rogers (Humanistic therapy: Benjafield, 2010). Talk therapy has therefore naturally been suited to academic students who are capable of working from a conceptual basis. Many Counselling Psychology Masters programs in Australia do not require students to undergo their own individual therapy, as it is not an Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) requirement, however some encourage it (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2010). Therefore utilisation of experience in therapy, where the student is the actual client, must not be regarded highly in Australian university programs. Experience of Mindfulness is the first step of Mindfulness-based therapy.

Traditional Mindfulness-based Therapy

Probably one of the first attempts to standardise Mindfulness-based therapy was the work of John Kabat-Zinn which began in the 1970's². Kabat-Zinn (1990) created what is

² Kabat-Zinn stresses that his work is therapeutic and not a therapy in itself (Santorelli & Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

now known as the Stress Reduction Clinic which is run out of the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre where he currently sits as the Professor of Medicine. Kabat-Zinn (1990) formulated what has been now termed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). MBSR is an eight-week group-based course where participants are taught a series of Mindfulness techniques involving sitting meditations, walking meditations, body scans, hatha yoga³ and Mindfulness education (Santorelli & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Homework tasks are given and participants are required to attempt all prescribed techniques. Kabat-Zinn's primary background is in Theravada Buddhism, which utilises an insight meditation technique as its primary approach. His teaching style is personable and hundreds of people attend his MBSR retreat trainings held throughout the world annually (UMASS, n,d).

Later empirically-based approaches to Mindfulness-based therapy include the work of Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002). Segal et al. (2002) developed a similar group-based eight-week program to MBSR termed Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Although MBCT is different from MBSR as it was developed specifically as a therapy for treatment-resistant depression. MBCT also incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and is slightly more structured in outline than MBSR. Research has recently illustrated that MBCT is highly effective in the treatment of depression (Craigie, 2010). Both MBSR and MBCT address Mindfulness in a formal manner and treatments are not individualised. To become an accredited MBCT or MBSR teacher one has to fulfill a series of requirements including a 10 day silent meditation retreat (UMASS, n,d; Segal et al. 2002)

³ Hatha Yoga is a broad term for a specific style of Yoga interested in bodily purification (Muktibodhananda, 2011). Kabat-Zinn was probably talking about asana (posture in Sanskrit), which is discussed in detail in Hatha Yoga texts and refers to the physical static poses an individual can practice. Many individuals view yoga as posture and nothing else; this is a common confusion.

Opportunities to Study Mindfulness-Based Therapy

Over the past decade there seems to have been an increasing interest in Mindfulness-based therapy. This can be primarily evidenced by the rise in publications about the treatment, as well as Mindfulness-based therapy interest websites and groups (Shapiro, 2009). Opportunities to study Mindfulness-based therapy abroad are becoming more popular for Australians. Masters and other postgraduate programs exist mainly in the United Kingdom. Bangor University offers a Masters course in Mindfulness-based Approaches and Oxford University and Exeter offer Graduate Diplomas focusing on MBCT⁴ (Bangor, n,d,; Oxford, n,d; Exeter, n,d,). These courses teach students about MBSR and/or MBCT extensively, however they do not allow a student to stray from the original group program too far and encourage further exploration of Mindfulness through non-secular paths such as Buddhism and Yoga (Dallaghan, P., *personal communication*, August 29, 2011).

Nevertheless, one probably doesn't need to complete a Masters degree in order to engage in Mindfulness-based therapy. An intense and practical course may be a suitable enough grounding in Mindfulness-based therapy (e.g., Whitehead, 2013). Students and professionals alike might need to be assessed on their practical and teaching skills when studying Mindfulness, rather than solely their academic capability.

Unfortunately little secular formal training exists in Australia for Mindfulness-based therapy aside from a few courses in MBSR and MBCT (Walsh, n,d). Openground (n,d) offers MBSR trainings throughout Australia that don't stray too far from the traditional MBSR model. However Openground (n,d) does offer information about where to practice non-secular forms of Mindfulness. Monash University runs a professional course in MBCT. In this course the individual becomes a participant in the MBCT program and then attends a weekend retreat to learn to teach the course⁵ (Monash

⁴ Qualification classifications differ in the United Kingdom when compared with Australian systems.

⁵ Other private institutions around Australia teach Mindfulness-Based approaches. For a complete list refer to (Walsh, n,d).

University, n,d). However one retreat is probably not going to be enough experience to become a Mindfulness teacher.

Teacher Competence and Standardisation

For all professionals involved in Mindfulness, practising Mindfulness techniques on a daily basis should be the requirement. It is difficult to acquire any Mindfulness techniques without practising them and practitioner attitude is important (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). B. K. S. Iyengar is one of the most famous yogis alive. Iyengar (2005) stated that learning meditation techniques is like training to run an Olympic marathon. So if an individual has never run before how could they be able to finish a 42km race? Practice is necessary so that the Mindfulness teacher is able to display a grounded and measurable understanding of the Mindfulness experience of a client via knowledge acquired both personally and theoretically (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, as cited in Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Clients will identify the teacher's genuineness in their ability to teach Mindfulness.

Without formal regulation bodies, teacher competence in Mindfulness-based therapy can only be arbitrary in nature. Mindfulness teachers can disclose their experience in teaching as well as practising but this cannot be verified. Therefore problems in therapy could arise when managing client's reactions to practising Mindfulness. Interestingly such stringent regulations exist to become any form of health professional in Australia. However, continuing professional development (CPD) has only recently come into the forefront of professional contextual development with the forming of the Australian Health Practitioners Regulatory Association (AHPRA) in 2011. CPD is now National Law for all members of AHPRA.

Managing Client Reactions in Mindfulness-based therapy

Mindfulness is probably the only therapy where direct experience as a practitioner is of utmost importance (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Whilst attempting Mindfulness-based therapy, a student may find that difficult emotions may arise. Some examples of these include but are not limited to; strange bodily sensations, feelings of breathlessness, frustration with

not progressing, feelings of throbbing or pain, visions, fever like symptoms, intense fear, anger, panic, intrusive or persistent thoughts, heat or cold sensations, or sudden intense memories re-emerging (Meditation Oasis, n,d; Kabatt-Zinn, 1990)

A student may also not feel comfortable in disclosing difficulties that may appear in their Mindfulness practice for fear of judgment from the therapist and, if the counter-transferential reaction to patient disclosure is not addressed appropriately, client dropout may occur⁶. Unless the Mindfulness therapist has undergone a similar range of experiences, sensations or feelings whilst practising, trust in the therapeutic relationship could be lost (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). These reactions may be damaging for a client's health and have the opposite effect than what is actually being sought. Therefore, competent Mindfulness teachers need to be trained before they utilise Mindfulness-based therapy.

Characteristics of a Competent Mindfulness Teacher

A Mindfulness therapist needs to be able to explain, rationalise (within context) and normalise a client's feelings and experiences whilst practising Mindfulness techniques. For example, a client begins to feel a tingle in their right leg whilst practising watching their breath. An explanation for this could be that their concentration has become more acute and they are able to pick up the sensations in certain areas of the body. A rationalisation could be, for example, as a child the client broke that leg and there was a disconnection between that area and now the mind body is healing⁷. A normalisation for the above could be that when dealing with the unconscious one would expect to hit little layers of trauma from the past, in that unexpected issues may come up whilst practising Mindfulness techniques.

If a Mindfulness therapist does not feel experienced enough to attempt the above explanation, rationalisation and normalisation, then they should probably have a think

⁶ Transferential reactions in therapy to self-disclosure and the concept of transference in Mindfulness-based therapy are beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷ At assessment stage this event, as all major life events, needs to be discussed.

about whether they are competent enough to teach Mindfulness-based therapy. It is doubtful that an eight-week training course will be enough to develop this level of understanding. Segal et al. (2002) experienced feelings of incompetence whilst developing MBCT; in fact they tried to write a book about Mindfulness before actually practising it. It takes many years in order for a therapist to understand and have enough personal experiences to guide a client through Mindfulness-based therapy (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Segal et al. 2002). This is where, as a teacher, appropriate self-disclosure (of practice experiences only) may be an important therapeutic tool (Harris, 2009). Self-disclosure in this context enables a client to feel guided by their more experienced teacher.

Teaching Mindfulness-based therapy

To teach Mindfulness-based therapy one may want to immerse themselves amongst a plethora of Mindfulness techniques in order to gain a full and complete understanding of theory and practice. Theory, source and lineage of Mindfulness teachers is also very important. Before studying with a Mindfulness teacher, one might want to make note of a Mindfulness teacher's teacher etc. in order to grasp their teachings as well as their biases and stage they were studying with their teacher (Cooper, G. *personal communication, January 31, 2013*). Whether the teacher is able to refer back to original Mindfulness scripture will help ascertain the teacher's level of understanding of Mindfulness. Knowledge of Mindfulness is always progressive so a true teacher is one who is able to adapt scripture to the individual client's context and surroundings as well as being open for change themselves. It is interesting to note that at the back of many books and courses on Mindfulness, students or readers are often referred on to other meditation techniques and centers (Williams, Teasdale, Segal & Kabat-Zinn, 2007). Meditation teachers are able to use Mindfulness to teach individuals who are functioning normally in society provided they have a regular Mindfulness practice. However they may not have a complete understanding of or experience in mental health and probably should refer individuals with mental health issues to appropriate professionals. Mindfulness teachers have a responsibility to be true to themselves both professionally and personally.

Mindfulness teachers might need to learn to come off autopilot whilst teaching; as thinking and acting mindfully are very different concepts. If a Mindfulness teacher is not in the present whilst teaching, their thoughts and actions are confused. When teaching Mindfulness-based therapy teachers might need to be fully present which includes not fiddling, scratching or talking excessively themselves. Otherwise these Mindfulness teachers are contradicting their actions. Mindfulness teachers also need to be aware of the individual and group environment whilst they are presenting in order to be fully effective. Many Mindfulness teachers (e.g., MBSR) also participate in the Mindfulness technique whilst teaching it within the group.

Mindfulness teachers might also want to try embracing Mindfulness in their own life (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Learning to incorporate Mindfulness in daily life will help teachers to see the potency of Mindfulness-based therapy. Mindfulness teachers may need to stop intellectualising all their Mindfulness experiences whilst practising. In other words, Mindfulness teachers should learn to surrender themselves to their practice (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness teachers need to give up their own expectations and deal with frustrations that may arrive akin to their clients. In order to do this, a Mindfulness teacher undoubtedly needs their own teacher or supervisor to guide and inspire them to continue with their own Mindfulness practice (Whitehead, 2013).

Discussion

The increase in popularity in Mindfulness-based treatment approaches leaves the writer with both excitement and hesitation. It is exciting that Mindfulness-based therapy is being considered as a reputable treatment approach in modern treatment settings, whilst usually as an alternative to traditional talk therapy. Due to its holistic nature, Mindfulness-based therapy gives a client individual responsibility for the course and outcome of their treatment (Williams et al., 2007). A client needs to practise what is required of them. However, the writer remains hesitant about the development of Mindfulness-based therapy due to limited professional training available in Australia and complete understanding of the experiential nature of Mindfulness.

This paper has discussed the concept of Mindfulness in detail and contrasted different perspectives, whilst providing a definition of Mindfulness. This article has also informed the reader of different trainings and courses available to study Mindfulness further. It has proposed how one should conduct themselves as a Mindfulness teacher and has touched on the potential inadequacies of Mindfulness teacher competence and Australian standardisation. It is hoped that this paper has assisted individuals and professionals alike who are wishing to engage in Mindfulness teachings and inspire the continual personal practice of Mindfulness. Mindfulness is a true gift to the world and practising with sincerity may have the power to change lives for the better.

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