

Five misconceptions in mindfulness and why they may be harming your pupils

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Abstract

Secular mindfulness has come into the education sector. Although acknowledging the source as the Buddhist teachings, it is very different. This paper looks at the original scriptures and draws out 5 misconceptions in practice and why they may be harmful to those who undertake them. These five areas of misconceptions are; history is not important (using the example of physics to begin with); the understanding of the difference between concept and reality is not necessary; the mental phenomena in this world are not conditioned; the purpose of mindfulness is to be calm and have less stress; wrong mindfulness will not harm you. The study will also show how the right understanding of mindfulness can be incorporated into the existing curriculum; as a starter in KS4 Biology, KS4 Physics, A level Medical physics and in PSHE /Citizenship and RE by exploring the understanding that attachment conditions aversion. These 5 misconceptions can show us another meaning of spirituality. We do not understand reality as it is, so we are attached and so suffer and cause others suffering.

Keywords: mindfulness, Buddhism, education, meditation, school

Introduction

The basic principle of secular (non-religious) mindfulness is to extract mindfulness out of Buddhism to free it from any dogmatic content. This mindfulness is 'Buddhism without the awkward Buddhist bits' (Moore, 2014). The Mindful Nation UK Report states the following about the source of mindfulness.

Methods for training mindfulness have long been central to the contemplative traditions of Asia, especially Buddhism. Using these methods, but freeing them from any religious or dogmatic content, Jon Kabat-Zinn began teaching his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course (MBSR) to patients at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in the late 1970s. ('Mindful Nation UK Report', 2015)

The basic tenet 'Using these methods' is under dispute here. Secular mindfulness does not take mindfulness out of Buddhism but rather just instigates its own greatly simplified version which arguably leads in the opposite direction to the original. Some commentators have dubbed this 'McMindfulness'. (Doran, 2018.) Mindfulness in Buddhism does not depend on any dogmatic belief as stated in the sutta 'Is there a method' (cited in Gorkom, 2014a, chapter 18).

Is there, monks, any method, by following which a monk, apart from belief, apart from inclination, apart from hearsay, apart from argument as to method, apart from reflection on reasons, apart from delight in speculation, could affirm insight thus:

Herein, Monks, a monk, seeing an object with the eye, either recognizes within him the existence of lust, aversion and ignorance, thus: I have lust, aversion and ignorance, or recognizes the non-existence of these qualities within him, thus: I have not lust, aversion and ignorance. Now as to that recognition of their existence or non-existence within him, are these conditions, I ask, to be understood by belief, or by inclination, or hearsay, or argument as to method, or reflection on reasons, or delight in speculation?

However, mindfulness does depend on the correct understanding of the theory. Secular mindfulness leaves this theory, an awkward bit, out. We read in the original texts that the Buddha's son could have no more mental suffering of any kind after the age of 20. In the Psalms of the Brethren, Rahula 294-298, he declares his attainment (Davids, 1980). He had perfected the development of right mindfulness. Of course we do not know this to be true, however, we can begin to understand why this might be the case by examining the theory of mindfulness to understand the mechanism by which it works. This theory must be right, otherwise, the practice will be wrong. Wrong practice will lead in opposite direction, so mental sufferings will increase. This theory is difficult. It is ambitious to understand it and in order to understand what is wrong, we have to understand what is right. Secular mindfulness is the wrong practice of mindfulness as practised by Buddhists 2500 years ago and this is shown through these 5 misconceptions.

The first misconception concerns the source of this right understanding. The following three are misconceptions of practice and the last is why these may be harmful.

History is not important

Does an astronaut in the space shuttle have any weight? This question is put to science trainee teachers to diagnose misconceptions in gravity. Around 90% of non-specialist science teacher trainees have a misconception of weight in space. Most will say their weight is very small or zero. Astronauts actually have a lot of weight in space. This is a complex problem involving the dynamics of circular motion. Difficult concepts get 'dumbed down'. We might call this watered down physics or Mcphysics or just wrong! It is easier to teach with this misconception rather than understand the truth of the laws of gravity and acceleration. Around 50% of physics specialists also have misconceptions over Newton's third law. To understand these misconceptions, we need to go back 300 years in history to Newton's 1st, 2nd, 3rd laws of motion and his law of gravitation. If we left trainees to come up with the answer by themselves, it would never happen. They do not have the ability. Newton was a pivotal figure in physics, we have learned from him. In two thousand years' time, these laws will still apply. At The University of East London, we have a list of 200 misconceptions for GCSE (14-16 years) physics, these were derived from a journal paper by Joel Klammer (Klammer, 1998). There are 15 misconceptions to do with gravity. The first one of his 200 misconceptions is that history has no place in science. If our pupils and teachers ignore these 'historical greats' they will have poor physics. History is important for physics.

Against the stream (of common thought).

Deep, subtle, fine, and hard to see,

Unseen it will be by passion's slaves cloaked in the murk of ignorance...

Kindred Sayings (I, VI, The Brahmā Suttas, Ch I, § 1) (Davids and Suriyagoda, 1979)

This was one of the first utterances of the Buddha. How many misconceptions might there be after 2500 years? A considerable part of understanding mindfulness must be to recognise and overcome misconceptions, just as we do in physics. Kabat-Zinn, considered to be the founder of secular mindfulness has this to say about mindfulness.

to insist mindfulness meditation is Buddhist is like saying gravity is English because it was identified by Sir Isaac Newton. (Booth, 2017)

Mindfulness does not belong to the Buddha in the same way as gravity does not belong to Newton. However, as we have seen most people have misconceptions about gravity and it requires someone who understands what Newton understood to correct these. People do not have the ability to figure this out by themselves. In the same way, the theory of mindfulness is deep and difficult and beyond most people to figure it out by themselves. Secular mindfulness has not been created as a result of understanding mindfulness in Buddhism and then removing the 'awkward bits'. It is not the mindfulness the Buddha taught. It is something else.

History is important to understand mindfulness.

The understanding of the difference between concept and reality is not necessary

The Tipitaka, the 'Bible of Buddhism' consists of three parts, the Abhidhamma is one of the parts. It consists of 7 books as well as 4 books of commentaries (Boriharnwanaket, 2006). It is essential for the understanding of 'How Mindfulness Works'. It is the engine of mindfulness. This engine is completely absent from secular mindfulness. Abhidhamma translates as 'higher reality' or 'higher teaching' from the Theravada tradition of Buddhism (Gorkom, 2014a Preface). These first two misconceptions concern how Abhidhamma applies to reality. Before we can begin to understand what mindfulness is, we must understand the difference between reality and concept as explained by Nina van Gorkom in Cetasikas (Gorkom, 2014b p193). We have two questions which can diagnose these misconceptions of reality and wrong practice. The first question. What can you see?

Reading Reality

The typical answer might be a person, table, words on a screen. We do not see words. We see different lines/shades; our mind instantly translates the lines into words. Seeing sees and this is followed by thinking in words. In the same way, the mind translates the different colours of what is seen into shape and form of

something such as a person. There are different types of thinking. Thinking of shape and form is a type of thinking. We perceive a computer, a person, table and chair. However, we cannot see them. What is seen is real, however, person, table, whiteboard, computer are ideas read out of reality. They are concepts, the object of thinking. This is not a theory of life, but life as it is. The reality which is seen is not understood. This is the domain of mindfulness; to study realities as they are so that they can be understood as just realities. The answer to the question is: seeing sees what can be seen or what is visible.

The engineer exploits this mechanism. You can go into orbit with Tim Peake and re-enter the Earth's atmosphere for £6.50 using a virtual reality headset at the science museum (Science Museum, 2018). Better than the actual thing because, unlike Tim Peake you can have a coffee and cookie afterwards, whereas he had to be carried out of his capsule by 10 or so people. This could be used as a starter in GCSE physics or A level medical physics. The eye is only sensitive to colour. The brain then reads this information to form up the idea of person or chair. Our future engineers need to know this if they are to design our virtual reality headsets and our iMax cinemas.

How many objects can you touch?

Only three objects can be touched. Typical answers such as the chair, table, the person shows the reality is hidden. We can only touch hardness or softness, hot or cold, motion or pressure. We experience a reality and this is immediately followed by thinking. A table is a concept, the object of thinking.

We used to think that a cushion or a chair could be experienced through touch. When we are more precise, it is hardness or softness that can be experienced through touch. Because of remembrance of former experiences, we can think of a cushion or chair and we know that they are named 'cushion' or 'chair'. This example can remind us that there is a difference between ultimate realities and concepts we can think of but which are not real in the ultimate sense. (Gorkom, 2009 p2)

If we take the word heat, this word represents a reality which can be directly experienced through the body-sense as hot or cold. We do not have to call it by any name. In science, we understand temperature as the average kinetic energy of the molecules. However, this is thinking about the temperature, not the direct experience of temperature. Science has zero understanding of reality in the sense that the object of its understanding is always a concept of reality but never the reality itself. Our KS4 (14-16 years old) biologists also need to know this and so we have a starter for them. The body is sensitive to these three objects and from these, nerve signals are sent to the brain via the nervous system. We are arguably turbo-charging science with these almost bland starters as we are turning the mind from concepts about reality to concepts pointing out realities which in turn is a condition for reality to be directly studied with mindfulness. We now have a challenge to science's understanding of the world which can be used in RE classes.

Mindfulness is a reality which studies reality directly. For example, normally when we touch a coffee mug the experience of hardness is overlooked, it is something which

is touched. When there is mindfulness, hardness, a reality, appears clearer than before. In this way, understanding of hardness will develop. It is essential for the development of mindfulness to know the object of mindfulness which is a reality, not a concept. Any practice involving posture or place is wrong. It shows up the wrong intellectual understanding of this theory of mindfulness, this difference between concept and reality. Posture is an idea 'read' out of reality. Hardness in Oxford Street is the same as hardness in the forest whether you are sitting, standing or walking. See Survey of Paramattha Dhammas, the chapter on concepts for further reading. (Boriharnwanaket, 2006)

The mental phenomena in this world are not conditioned

Physics shares one fundamental principle with Buddhism, namely physical phenomena are conditioned. However, Buddhism extends this to all mental phenomena in life are also conditioned. We have grouped phenomena into two types: concepts and realities. We can classify all realities as two types. The mental and the physical. Sound does not experience anything (physical) but can be experienced. Hearing consciousness experiences sound (mental). Hearing consciousness does not live anywhere, it does not have any arms and legs, it just experiences sound. It is a mental phenomenon. Anger, attachment, love, intention are mental phenomena, they experience an object. What we take for a person, chair, car, bus, are just different realities which come into existence by a condition and fall away immediately. All realities of life are conditioned, are impermanent and are just realities, not things. This is the purpose of mindfulness to directly study them, to see them as they are. When you clap your hand a sound is produced. The sound does not come from anywhere, it does not go anywhere. It arises from a condition and falls away. It only arises once in life. Anger, sadness, compassion, kindness are mental phenomena which arise from conditions. There is no abiding self or agent who has control over them. They arise once and then they are gone completely never to return. In the absolute sense, there is no person, no self, just different realities arising and falling away from different conditions.

Mindfulness is conditioned to arise. No one can make mindfulness arise. Intention to have it is not a condition for it, sitting is not a condition, and quietness is not a condition. The right intellectual understanding of the teachings i.e. the difference between realities and concepts, the conditionality of phenomena and the true nature of each reality, forms up a condition for the studying of reality with awareness. When realities are studied in this way, understanding can grow to reveal characteristics of reality as they are by direct experience.

By listening and considering, the right conditions are being accumulated for the arising of satipaṭṭhāna (mindfulness), awareness and investigation of the characteristics of the realities that are appearing. In this way, realities can be known as they are. Through awareness of realities, one will directly understand the truth in conformity with what one has learnt and understood intellectually, namely, that all dhammas (realities), including satipaṭṭhāna and the factors of the eightfold Path, are anattā, non-self. Satipaṭṭhāna can arise when there are the right conditions, that is, when mahā-kusala citta (wholesome consciousness) accompanied by paññā has arisen time and

again, and paññā has thus been accumulated. Then people will not deviate anymore from the right Path. They will not follow a practice other than being aware of, noticing and considering the nāma (mental) dhammas and the rūpa (physical) dhammas (realities) appearing through the six doors.
(Boriharnwanaket, 2006 chapter Factors of Enlightenment)

Any practice involving going to a certain place at a certain time or selecting an object or trying is wrong practice; it is the self trying. Realities work by themselves. Mindfulness begins with detachment from the very beginning, it arises from conditions. The development of mindfulness leads to detachment from the idea of self. Secular mindfulness lacks this condition for mindfulness relying on a belief in a self who can make mindfulness arise. It cannot lead to detachment from the idea of self. It is, therefore, heading in the opposite direction i.e. the accumulation of attachment to the idea of self. The following sutta affirms these misconceptions.

...By whom was wrought this being? Where is he

Who makes him? Whence doth a being rise?

Where doth the being cease and pass away?

Then Sister Vajira thought: Who now is this, human or non-human, that speaketh verse? Sure it is Mara the evil one that speaketh verse,

...And the Sister, knowing it was Mara, replied in verse:-

Being! Why dost thou harp upon that word?

Mong false opinions, Mara, hast thou strayed.

Mere bundle of conditioned factors, this!

No being can be here discerned to be.

For just as, when the parts are rightly set,

The word chariot ariseth [in our minds],

So doth our usage covenant to say:

A being when the aggregates are there.

Nay, it is simply ill that rises, ill

That doth persist, and ill that wanes away.

Nought beside ill it is that comes to pass,

Nought else but ill it is doth cease to be.

Kindred Sayings 1, Ch v, 10 (Davids and Suriagoda, 1979)

The precise understanding of the impermanence of reality will lead to the eradication of clinging to the idea of self. Suffering in the absolute sense is the arising and falling away of each reality. This difference between concept and reality is completely missing in GCSE Buddhism specifications, as such, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths has no meaning.

We now have a new meaning of the word spirituality which can be used in RE sessions. We go wrong because we have misconceptions about reality itself. We suffer and cause others to suffer because we take the concept for reality. We take for permanent what is impermanent, what is happiness for what is suffering, what is something for what is just a reality. Attachment therefore accumulates and we go wrong and suffer because of that. We also now have a challenge to the humanism which could be used in Citizenship or RE classes. The humanist will go wrong sooner or later. He or she makes the assumption that there is an abiding self or ego that can make decisions as to right or wrong. In reality, each moment is conditioned and the humanist unknowingly accumulates the condition for going wrong.

The purpose of mindfulness is to be calm and have less stress

The purpose of mindfulness is to study reality in order to understand its characteristics as it is. Understanding reality will condition detachment. When there is mindfulness, a reality appears clearer than before, its characteristic is apparent and understanding can grow. This understanding will eliminate attachment to the idea of self and eventually all attachment. This understanding is called insight meditation in Pāli: vipassanā. It is not intellectual understanding but the direct understanding of a characteristic of reality.

Meditation

Nina van Gorkom explains about Tranquil Meditation, the development of calm.

Even before the Buddha's time, there were people who saw the disadvantages of sense impressions and the clinging to them. They developed Tranquil Meditation.

Tranquil meditation, in Pāli: samatha and insight meditation in Pāli: vipassanā have each a different aim and a different way of development. In tranquil meditation, one develops calm by concentrating on a meditation subject in order to be temporarily free from sense impressions and the attachment which is bound up with them. (Gorkom, 2011)

For example, when we have mental states rooted in detachment such as kindness, generosity, compassion, there is calmness at such moments, but for a very short length of time. By thinking about kindness over and over again, it can condition more moments of calm. One object of tranquil meditation is mindfulness of breathing but this is very difficult and not suitable for the beginner. Indeed it could cause someone to hyperventilate and become dizzy with headaches.

But this mindfulness of breathing is difficult, difficult to develop, a field in which only the minds of Buddhas, "Silent Buddhas", and Buddhas' sons are at home. The Path of Purification (VIII, 211). (Gorkom, 2011)

The development of calm is not necessary for the development of insight but can go along with it. These two distinct forms of meditation get confused with each other. Secular mindfulness has lost this aim to understand reality and blocks this understanding by taking itself to be the proper way.

Wrong mindfulness will not harm you

Understanding characteristics of reality as they are leads to detachment from them. We are very attached to people, but a person cannot be seen or touched only a characteristic of reality can be seen or touched. 'Reality lies' to us when we have the illusion of permanence and of a self. Attachment is a condition for aversion. This can be towards ideas as well as sense objects. The examples below could be explored in RE, PSHE and Citizenship lessons.

- The cat jumps in front of the television when Strictly Come Dancing (or our favourite programme) is on, resulting in stress.
- The Tunbridge Wells resident (upmarket-town) is devastated when Poundland (down-market shop) comes to the City Centre.
- The wife gets agitated when coffee is poured into a tea mug.
- The devastated teenager whose smartphone has run out of battery.
- The unhappy mother who cannot cross the road with her baby due to traffic queuing for a superstore.

If you are a teacher you could try this lovely idea from Teachers TV, authored by Susie Paskins (Paskins, 2015). With your 11-year-old, pupils get them to colour in a picture of a Mandala for half an hour then get the best-behaved pupil to come forward and explain their picture to the rest of the class. Then tell this person to rip it up and put it in the bin! Watch him/her and the whole class burst into tears.

The Buddha spoke the below about attachment.

In bondage to the dear and sweet, many a deva many a man,

Worn with woe, submit themselves to the Lord of Death's command.

But they who, earnest night and day, cast aside the lovely form,

They dig up the root of woe, the bait of Death so hard to pass.

Udana 11, vii (Woodward, 1987)

Attachment is cast aside by understanding the true nature of what it is we are attached to. Realities are impermanent and only last a split second, this understanding will condition detachment. Attachment is a condition for aversion and all manner of other problems. Immorality is rooted in not understanding reality as it is. Racism, sexism, stealing, sexual misconduct, genocide are caused by mental states rooted in attachment.

Conclusion

A basic understanding of Abhidhamma is the essential key to the development of mindfulness; it opens up the deep meaning of the suttas and can test whether the development of mindfulness is right or wrong. For example, any practice involving posture is wrong. Sitting is merely an idea read out of reality. It matters not that we sit, stand, run or skydive. Any practice involving the idea of self-trying; selecting an object; selecting a special time or place; watching or observing. Any practice motivated by attachment is wrong. This path of mindfulness must begin with detachment. Matching these misconceptions against the Mindfulness Nation UK report on mindfulness (The Mindfulness Initiative, 2015 p12). We see that there are 6 fundamental misconceptions of mindfulness in that report. Secular mindfulness has come into our schools and universities, largely unchallenged. Yet in these practices, there is no evidence that the difference between concept and reality is understood, neither is there the understanding of the application of conditionality to practice, the mechanism by which mindfulness arises is therefore lost. The mechanism becomes the idea of the self who can cause mindfulness to arise. This is going in the opposite direction to the purpose of mindfulness which is detachment from the idea of self and so it merely becomes another object of attachment. It is harmful because it misleads into thinking that it is being developed and it makes it harder to develop correctly. It blocks the understanding of the world by taking itself to be the right path. Attachment to the objects around us and to the idea of self will accumulate with the inevitable consequence of suffering for the practitioner.

Secular mindfulness is fake mindfulness. It misses the real, it is merely a subset of the wrong practice of mindfulness. Pupils and students who practise it will fall into the flame of the lamp sooner or later.

They hasten up and past, but miss the real;

A bondage ever new they cause to grow.

Just as the flutterers fall into the lamp,

So some are bent on what they see and hear.

Udana VI, ix (Woodward, 1987)

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