

Golden Nuggets of Mindfulness for Lifelong Learners

An Introduction to Mindfulness and Lifelong Learning

Mindfulness

The history, definitions and current issues related to mindfulness and its contemporary field of research and application are rich sources of academic study. When introducing mindfulness to new audiences, I often present it in terms of 3 aspects that seem to encapsulate the different meanings of the term. These are that mindfulness refers to 1) a state of being, 2) a set of practices and techniques, and/or 3) a field of research and application.

As a state of being it has been defined in many different ways. From a Buddhist perspective it is a “kind of attentiveness that ... is good, skilful or right” (Nyanaponika, 1962, p9). Of course, to cultivate what is good, skillful or right in this context requires an understanding and commitment to the broader philosophy and lifestyle of Buddhism itself (in its various manifestations). For Jon Kabat-Zinn, often referred to as the father of contemporary mindfulness, it is “...paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p4). From a more secular and psychological perspective, Ellen Langer (often referred to as the mother of mindfulness) defines it as a state of alertness and lively awareness, in which the biases of our existing categorisations are calibrated so as not to impair our present experience or response (Langer, 1997). For Langer, studying how the state of mindlessness (or autopilot) limits our functioning leads to awareness techniques that cultivate the state of mindfulness to facilitate functioning. The difficulty is that humans tend naturally toward mindlessness due to our limited attentional capacity (Langer, 1989). In searching for the common ground between such definitions, Shapiro et al. (2006) offered an approach that includes three axioms that are simultaneously engaged during the state of mindfulness. These axioms are 1) Intention, 2) Attention, and 3) Attitude and are focussed upon the present and moment-to-moment experience of the person.

Throughout the history of mindfulness a number of practices and techniques have been developed to cultivate the state of mindfulness and access it in everyday moments. These practices and techniques have been formulated to the highest degree in Buddhism, and contemporary mindfulness does not deny these roots. However, contemporary mindfulness also contains approaches, practices and techniques that are framed in a variety of religious, spiritual and secular perspectives. As such, it is presented as a “universal dharma framework” that is focussed upon transcending the causes and effects of shared human suffering (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p296). It is “...congruent with Buddhadharma but not constrained by its historical, cultural and religious manifestations associated with its counties of origin and their unique traditions” (*ibid*, p2).

One way that I often explain how mindfulness is beneficial is to consider its opposite state, the before-mentioned state of mindlessness or autopilot. Being in a state of mindlessness leads to a wandering mind. Whilst brief or trained experiences of this state may yield

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some benefits for memory, creativity and problem-solving, prolonged and uncontrolled experiences often lead to a worrying mind. Left to its own devices, this often leads to catastrophic thinking, anxiety and stress-related responses. Being on autopilot inherently leads to our established and/or strongest habits of mind, body, emotions and behaviour being expressed. When these habits are maladaptive, they become unhealthy and disruptive. The remedy for this cycle of events is therefore to cultivate the mindfulness state in the hope that we may avoid experiences of mindlessness and the wandering mind (or at least control it intentionally). For times when the mindless state creeps upon us, the hope is that we may use techniques supported by a depth of practice that allow us to be aware of our habits of mind, body, emotion and behaviour and to intentionally choose more healthy and adaptive responses in and to the present-moment. In this sense, I often refer to mindfulness as an 'awareness-change' or 'two-step' model.

The depth of practice alluded to above comes in the form of meditative techniques that are cultivated in a disciplined and intentional manner. Deriving from the Buddhist origins, there now exists a wealth of meditations in contemporary mindfulness. Whilst there is debate about the primacy of meditation as the primary vehicle for the cultivation of the mindful state, it has been complemented with the development and use of Langerian-type non-meditative techniques (what I term 'in-the-moment' techniques). Some of these meditative and non-meditative practices and techniques feature as the 'formal' and 'informal' practices in contemporary mindfulness-based programmes of learning (Santorelli et al, 2017).

'Mindfulness-based' programmes of learning emerged in 1979 with Jon Kabat-Zinn's foundational Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This course has been used as a meta-structure (McCown, Reibel and Mcozzi, 2010) for the development and application of a plethora of Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) and Programmes (MBPs). A pronounced increase in these applications has been followed by an increase in empirical publications and media interest (Black, 2014), as shown in diagram 1 below. Thus, the contemporary field of mindfulness has been driven by application (particularly clinical interventions).

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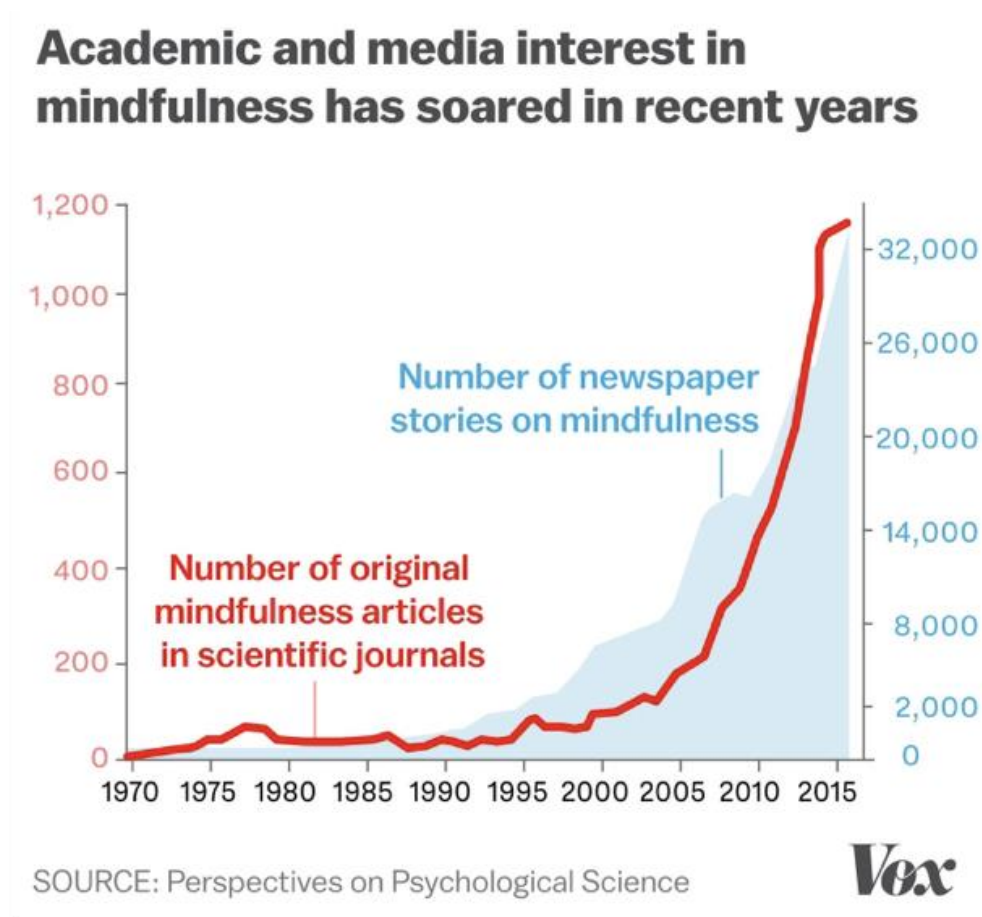


Diagram 1: Empirical publication and media interest in mindfulness.

The result of this is that the current status of the field is one where it is experiencing a sort of pre-paradigmatic crisis in which there is a wide diversity of competing definitions and approaches. Interestingly, Kabat-Zinn seemed to be aware of this during the early development of the field. He recalls how there was an “intentional ignoring and glossing over of potentially important historical, philosophical, and cultural nuances” and that various foundational elements, such as the definition and operationalisation of the term mindfulness itself, “could be worked out later by scholars and researchers” (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p290). This has left the contemporary field with a variety of issues and debates that are ripe for academic study. Indeed, it is my opinion that this ‘working out’ is vital at the current time in order for mindfulness to develop in the coming years.

Lifelong learning

The term lifelong learning is often used synonymously with continuing education and adult education. In essence, these all refer to a person’s engagement with formal programmes of education beyond the conclusion of compulsory education (London, 2021). For some, lifelong learning is not restricted to formal programmes and consists of any form of learning throughout the lifespan. For example, Jarvis (2006, p. 134) defines it as:

The combination of processes throughout a life time whereby the whole person— body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills,

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attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses)—experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

This definition hints at the multi-faceted nature of lifelong learning. Here, the focus is upon the person as a holistic being - mind, body, emotions and behaviour (and some may add spirit). The person is also an individual *and* a social being, bringing and sharing themselves and being transformed by their learning experiences. There are many other facets at play in lifelong learning too. For some, the journey is one of personal development through learning. For others, it may be part of professional development or further training. A person may engage in lifelong learning to better their own situation, to equip themselves to help others or both. The lifelong learner may be fresh from completing compulsory education, returning to education after not completing compulsory education, retraining as part of a career change, simply learning for learning later in life or at many other periods of their lives for many other reasons. Indeed, in terms of mindfulness and from my own experience, it is not uncommon to find a number of these facets present within the same group of learners.

The contemporary history of lifelong learning can be presented as two waves of development (Hager, 2021). Despite the concept emerging far beforehand, the first wave of development occurred during the 1970s. During this period there were many developments in theory and policy that concerned lifelong learning, although the terminology, concepts and models used varied greatly and sowed the seeds for conflict and debate that still exists today (Duke, 2001). Of particular importance was UNESCO's promotion of lifelong education, Faure et al's (1972) advocacy for the learning society, the Council of Europe's focus upon lifelong learning as a mechanism for European integration and the OECD's concept of recurrent education. It is interesting to note that informal lifelong learning only featured in the latter of these and it was criticised for diluting the concept of education. From such debates the broader issues concerning the purpose of education began to dominate the discussions. One of these that is particularly and contemporarily related to mindfulness is the debate as to whether education (and lifelong learning) should focus upon the wider social good (thus leading to personal development) or personal development (thus leading to the wider social good). Mindfulness is itself an inside-out approach, in which societal change is best delivered through the outward expression of genuine internal transformations.

The second wave of development began in the 1990s and is characterised by the adoption of lifelong learning as the standard term by many (but not all). Whereas the first wave was curtailed by debates about the philosophical grounding of lifelong learning, in the 1990s the second was propelled by the gravity of neoliberalism. National and international bodies once again focussed upon learning and education but now with more of a focus upon its contribution to maintaining and/or advancing economic prowess. Technological advancements and societal changes brought with them the perspective that lifelong learning was a necessity to adapt to these changes and to

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cultivate personal development via lifelong learning would not only benefit the individual, but society and the economy at the national level too.

Since this second wave the changes in technological advancements and local, national and global societies have accelerated even further. The enthusiasm for lifelong learning in its formal and informal manifestations has been diluted by economic pressures. The 2000s were marked by the early enthusiasm of the neoliberal approach of the 'knowledge economy'. The Lisbon strategy of 2000 encapsulated this with its focus upon the multi-facet benefits of lifelong learning, from the supranational to the national to the institutional and to the individual (Alves, Neves and Gomes, 2010). The economic crash of the late 2010s and subsequent shifts in the geopolitical, economic and climate landscape has led to an increased focus away from individual development and informal learning in Western neoliberal economies, and in the UK in particular (Government Office for Science, 2017). A focus upon functionality and skills development remains the focus within an increasingly competitive and uncertain global environment. It appears that the global COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the changes and sharpened the focus that were already present as we left the decade behind. The current policy of the 'lifetime skills guarantee' (Department for Education, 2021) follows this direction of travel.

It is within this environment that the collaborators of this book have experienced and navigated our own lifelong learning journeys. We have been impacted by many of the wider issues introduced here. The fledgling field of mindfulness has had to establish itself within these conditions too. It is from within these conditions, and perhaps because of them, that mindfulness has grown to be perceived by many as a powerful contributor to meeting the challenges of the ever-changing world on which we live. This is arguably most apparent in the process of learning itself and is of course the focus of this book. For, as Schoeberlein and Sheth (2009, p. xi) eloquently say:

Mindfulness and education are beautifully interwoven. Mindfulness is about being present with and to your inner experience as well as your outer environment, including other people. When teachers are fully present, they teach better. When students are fully present, the quality of their learning is better.