



Mental Health Matters: Making sense of ‘Mindfulness’

AKA: The gentle art of befriending your mind

Most of us have heard of ‘mindfulness’, but do we know what it means? It’s quite likely that you’ll have come across it as some kind of remedy, perhaps as a ‘treatment’ for depression and anxiety or an antidote to stress. **This is entirely valid** for mindfulness-based therapies are now recommended in NHS treatment guidelines for recurrent depression and ‘Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction’ (MBSR) has, over the last 30 years, found a secure and expanding role in many areas of life where ‘stress reduction’ is desirable – from coping with long term illness and disability, to business and politics and navigating the tensions and difficulties for us all in everyday life.

All of which is an astonishing development for a practice which was discovered and developed in N India, 2500 years ago, as a path to liberation by calming the mind and freeing oneself from endless wanting, dissatisfaction and confusion, so as to become more aware, awake and alive. The broader transformational, potential of this simple practice comes into view when we see it in the context of its ancient origins and teachings. For it is what the man called Siddhartha Gotama was doing, sitting under a tree, by a river, focusing with full awareness on his breathing, when he became the Buddha, the man who woke up, and then spent the rest of his life teaching it to others.

But what is ‘mindfulness’?

This small question could have a very big answer ... one that already fills a great many published books. Perhaps confusingly, it’s nothing to do with having either a ‘full’ or ‘empty’ mind. It’s more a matter of gradually developing the ability to become clearly aware of the activity

of our mind, as it unfolds, moment by moment and to then calmly reflect on that awareness without reacting, jumping to conclusions, criticisms or judgements or getting caught up with and carried off in associations and stories. It's about learning how to pause and respond appropriately rather than with habitual reactivity. It's about learning how to relate helpfully and hopefully to our own mental and bodily experience with care and understanding, even wisdom.

The foundations of mindfulness

The Oxford Mindfulness Centre teaches that this experience of mindfulness is based upon cultivating three essential qualities of mind and, like a three legged stool, all are needed and when balanced offer a secure and supportive base for wellbeing.

Stability – learning to be calm, to rest, relax and sit quietly with the mind as it jumps around, digresses and tells stories.

Clarity – learning to see the movement of the mind. How one thing leads to another, developing insight and understanding into our habitual patterns and reactions - how the mind behaves.

Kindness – learning to bring a compassionate attitude to our experience and to hold whatever is happening to us and within us with patience, acceptance and ethical sensitivity.

Learning mindfulness is based upon these 3 supports or pillars.

How did we get to be where we are now?

Historically, it is possible to see something similar to mindfulness being taught in many religious and contemplative cultures around the world. But explicit teaching in modern times arrived in the West with Buddhism, which landed upon our shores in three main ways:

1. Through the migration of established Buddhist leaders, who came as teachers, exiles and explorers and established study centres similar to the monasteries they had left behind in their homelands such as the Dalai Lama in India and Thich Nhat Hahn in France.
2. Returning converts, western adventurers, who came home from Asia after many years of training, sometimes as ordained monks

and nuns and sought to reproduce or adapt and teach what they'd learned from a wide range of Buddhist cultures. Some by establishing new Buddhist schools (such as Triratna, formerly 'Friends of the Western Buddhist Order') and many with meditation centres such as Gaia House in S Devon. A Google search of 'Buddhism in Devon' lists and maps 14 different groups from a wide range of these different Asian traditions, 5 just around Exeter.

3. Still others returned well trained but interested in the very many bridges and overlaps between Buddhist insights into human nature (Dharma) and western 'wisdom' drawn from science, psychology, psychotherapy and philosophy. These convergent interests led to the growth and development of secular mindfulness trainings such as MBSR and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for which Exeter has been a national centre and secular approaches to Buddhism pioneered at Sharpham House by Stephen Batchelor

Difference, dissonance and diversity

It's therefore quite easy to run into a confusing range of approaches and it's natural to experience these as in competition with one another ... how are we to know which is better or best – for me?

In reality these diverse offers have all come from the same fundamental insights and teachings on the nature of human nature. Their apparent differences are more to do with how they are packaged in association with the diverse cultures and traditions they have arisen from. The practical question is more a matter of what will suit us personally and what we may find helpful. It's like there are many different kinds of food and people have strong views on what's best but we can be equally nourished with a wide range of cuisines. The important thing is to find what is to your 'taste'. What do you enjoy, find digestible, feel comfortable with and are therefore more able to learn from?

How do I make a start or gather support for my practice?

Devon has a very rich history of mindfulness related supports and opportunities and there are also a wide range of well-developed online resources. This abundance of choices can be very confusing.

The appendix below lists suggestions to look into but it may be useful to first consider:

What am I interested in or attracted to?

What am I looking for and hoping to find?

Some, perhaps most of us at the outset, will be looking for relief from unpleasant experiences, depression, anxiety, stress, pain and there are 'evidence based' approaches designed to offer such therapeutic benefits via MBSR or MBCT courses and several very popular Apps. This has been underpinned by positive research findings such as those from the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, which have validated engagement with mindfulness in healthcare settings.

Some people are attracted to mindfulness in the context of its Buddhist origins, which will point us towards a wide range of Asian schools accessible in western settings and through visits to the East.

Others greatly value learning from the broader perspective of interdisciplinary and transcultural studies which drawn upon the earliest teachings of the historical buddha, uncoupled from their later religious associations. These are currently being reconsidered in the light of western philosophical, psychological and psychotherapeutic teachings and the findings of neuroscience. There is growing interest in secular settings to integrate this convergent stream of insights and the 'treasure chest of ancient wisdom'. This has led to, some would say 'recovered', a broader view of mindfulness as a practical, ethical and contemplative way of life which is increasingly being taught in various contexts as: Secular Buddhism, Mindfulness Based Living, contemplative neuroscience, and Compassionate Mind Training.

Learning how to learn: what's next?

There are a lot of teachings and ideas about mindfulness (see below), but it is important not to get lost or overwhelmed by that. The key is to understand that mindfulness is not an idea or a theory but a practice – something we do. We can learn about mindfulness and benefit from contact with clear, experienced and wise teachers but we can only gain benefit in our lives by active participation and reflection on our

experience – following what we find helpful. Likewise we can all benefit from the support and companionship of those who share these interests. And we can certainly help one another, but personal progress is about finding our feet, our own feet, on the ground, where we are, not relying on authorities, or following or copying anyone else. It's about finding our own practice, our own way to live our lives, our own path, and gradually becoming confident and comfortable in that.

Mindfulness is a skill, it is the cultivation of a natural capability, a rewarding and restoring aspect of our human nature, which is open to all - but it is difficult too. However, as a practical life skill, it is no more difficult than training a dog, learning to cook, play a musical instrument or developing a flourishing garden. Clearly there are personal choices involved in committing to any of these, but in fact mindfulness is often pictured as an artisanal skill, a practical art and it's interesting that many of these are done as mindfulness practices.

So ... take care and good luck with your explorations

All good wishes

Glenn Roberts for

BradTog MHM

Sources and resources

Brief Introductions to mindfulness

Devon County Council

www.learndevon.co.uk/?s=mindfulness&post_type=tb_courses

And the Devon Recovery Learning Community www.devonrlc.co.uk/ both regularly run free beginners courses ... but fill up quickly so keep looking.

Headspace has an excellent introductory video series on Netflix

Book: Mindfulness for Beginners. Jon Kabat Zinn (2012, inc CD)

Mindfulness for therapeutic benefit

Courses: There are many sources of MBSR and MBCT 8 week courses to be found online and many trainers in Devon. The University of Exeter (NHS) offer a free self-referral MBCT course for recurrent depression

<https://www.exeter.ac.uk/mooddisorders/acceptclinic/>

Apps: around 400million people have accessing mindfulness apps worldwide, which makes them the entry point of choice (for some). Here's one review of the Top 15 <https://www.independent.co.uk/extras/indybest/gadgets-tech/phones-accessories/best-mindfulness-apps-a8217931.html>

Headspace, Calm and Insight Timer are recommended.

Books: Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world. Mark Williams and Danny Penman (2010, inc CD)

Mindfulness as a way of life and living

Book: The Miracle of Mindfulness by Thich Nhat Hahn – a trusted gateway by 'the monk who taught the world mindfulness'

Oxford Mindfulness Centre: learning, training, ongoing community of practice <https://www.oxfordmindfulness.org/>

Buddhist teachings and teachers

There are a great many based in many traditions. Here are just two

Christina Feldman - a talk on 'Wise mindfulness' which is found on Dharma Seed; an archive of talks in the Western Insight Meditation tradition inc those from Gaia House (S Devon) <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/44/talk/15327/>

Thich Nhat Hahn – Plum Village <https://plumvillage.org/>

Secular approaches to Buddhist teachings

Exeter Meditation Circle: www.meditationcircle.org.uk/

Bodhi College: Early Buddhist teaching for today www.bodhi-college.org/

Secular Buddhist Network: www.secularbuddhistnetwork.org/

The Sharpham Trust – Education Trust and retreat centre in S Devon <https://www.sharphamtrust.org/about-us/the-trust>

Mindfulness and Government in the UK

Mindful Nation UK is a report published in 2015 by the UK Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group which concludes by recommending the broad provision of mindfulness training in society including health care, prisons, workplace settings and education <https://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org/mindful-nation-report>

The Mindfulness Initiative ... a cross party personal training programme to teach politicians and parliamentary staff mindfulness <https://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org/story-so-far>