1

On the Contemporary Applications of Mindfulness: Some Implications for Education

TERRY HYLAND

THE CONCEPT OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness has become something of a boom industry over the last few decades, thanks largely to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) who developed a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme in his work at the Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Since then the work of Kabat-Zinn and associates (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Segal, Williams and Teasdale, 2002; Williams et al., 2007; Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2013) has been responsible for a massive global expansion of interest in mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in a diverse range of domains including work in schools, prisons, workplaces and hospitals, in addition to wide applications in psychology, psychotherapy, education and medicine. An Internet search on the concept of mindfulness retrieves around 18 million items and, in terms of publications, numbers have grown from one or two per year in 1980 to around 400 per year in 2011 (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 3; the growth of mindfulness publications has been exponential over the last few years, see American Mindfulness Research Association, https://goamra.org/).

In accounting for this burgeoning interest in the idea of mindfulness we are immediately faced with questions of definition, meaning and interpretation. What is the relationship between the concept of mindfulness which informs Buddhist traditions and that which is utilised in the treatment of addictions and chronic pain sufferers? Moreover, is there a coherent concept which connects mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) programmes—for example, the treatment of cancer sufferers (Bartley, 2012), addiction therapy (Baer, 2006) and
care of elderly people in nursing homes (Langer, 1989)—with the use of mindfulness in education (Hyland, 2011)?

Thich Nhat Hanh (1999)—the renowned Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and campaigner for world peace and justice—describes mindfulness as being ‘at the heart of the Buddha’s teachings’. It involves ‘attention to the present moment’ which is ‘inclusive and loving’ and ‘which accepts everything without judging or reacting’ (p. 64). Kabat-Zinn (1990, 1994) and associates have been largely responsible for transforming the original spiritual notion (i.e. the training of the mind to alleviate suffering in ourselves and others) into a powerful and ubiquitous therapeutic tool based on forms of meditation and mindful practices. Mindfulness simply means ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally’ in a way which ‘nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality’. Such practice—whether this involves breathing or walking meditation or giving full non-judgmental attention to everyday activities—can offer a ‘powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back in touch with our own wisdom and vitality’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, pp. 4–5).

Bodhi (2013) explains that the original sati (the Pali word for mindfulness, smriti in Sanskrit) meant memory or recollection as originally interpreted by Rhys Davids the founder of the Pali Text Society in 1910. Another layer of meaning relating to ‘lucid awareness’ using all the senses was added later and this forged the connection between the ‘two primary canonical meanings: as memory and as lucid awareness of present happenings’ (ibid., p. 25).

Bodhi (2013) also points to the role of mindfulness (in addition to being the seventh strand of the path) in integrating other elements of the noble eightfold path, a role which Hanh (1999) also highlights in observing that:

When right mindfulness is present the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are also present. When we are mindful, our thinking is Right Thinking, our speech is Right Speech, and so on. Right Mindfulness is the energy that brings us back to the present moment (p. 64).

There are, however, two aspects of the secular therapeutic conception of mindfulness—as ‘bare attention’ and non-conceptual, non-judgmental awareness—which require explanation in terms of their difference from Buddhist traditional notions. Buddhist accounts of the awareness involved in sati indicate an awareness which is cognitive, discursive and goes beyond pre-conceptual bare attention
to include the ‘perception of the body’s repulsiveness, and mindfulness of death’. Moreover, there is ‘little evidence in the Pali canon and its commentaries that mindfulness by its very nature is devoid of conceptualization’ (Bodhi, 2013, p. 28, original italics).

In addition, the work of Dreyfus (2013) on the cognitive dimensions of mindfulness has suggested that the non-judgmental features of the modern mainstream interpretation need to be modified in the light of original Buddhist emphases. Echoing aspects of Bodhi’s analysis, Dreyfus contends that the ‘understanding of mindfulness/sati as present-centred non-evaluative awareness is problematic for it reflects only some of the ways in which these original terms are deployed’ (p. 45). Using Buddhagosa’s (the 5th century Indian Buddhist scholar) commentaries, he concludes that:

Mindfulness is then not the present-centred non-judgmental awareness of an object but the paying close attention to an object, leading to the retention of the data so as to make sense of the information delivered by our cognitive apparatus. Thus, far from being limited to the present and to a mere refraining from passing judgment, mindfulness is a cognitive activity closely connected to memory, particularly working memory . . . (ibid., p. 47).

Although many modern representations of mindfulness in the context of MBSR/MBCT programmes (Williams et al., 2007; Crane, 2009) implicitly contain this additional active dimension of awareness, Dreyfus is concerned to foreground and emphasise the important cognitive features of meditation. Through constant practice such insightful awareness uses evaluation of mental states to ‘gain a deeper understanding of the changing nature of one’s bodily and mental states so as to free our mind from the habits and tendencies that bind us to suffering’ (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 51). The crucial importance of developing such deeper insights into the nature of suffering are present in the literature on MBSR/MBCT but, as Teasdale and Chaskalson (2013) argue, they deserve much greater attention.

Gethin (2013) suggests that contemporary secular therapeutic mindfulness approaches could be said to portray a ‘minimalist’ account of the process and that the:

. . . traditional Buddhist account of mindfulness plays on aspects of remembering, recalling, reminding and presence of mind that can seem underplayed or even lost in the context of MBSR and MBCT (p. 275).
However, notwithstanding the presence of slightly different interpretations of mindfulness between older Buddhist traditions and modern strategies, the vast majority of commentators welcome the extension of mindfulness to therapeutic applications (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Indeed, in the context of mindfulness practice in education, health services, psychology and psychotherapy, it could be argued that the new applications represent a dynamic and optimistic new wave of Western dharma comparable to earlier developments in Eastern traditions as the basic teachings travelled out from India to China, Sri Lanka, Tibet and Japan (Batchelor, 2011; Bazzano, 2014). Arguably, the efficacy of mindfulness practices in the historically neglected domain of the education of the emotions—concerned with fostering affective resilience and holistic mind/body wellbeing—in itself provides a powerful justification for the introduction of MBIs into schools and colleges (Siegel, 2007; Hyland, 2011, 2014a).

MINDFULNESS, MORALITY AND FREEDOM

Mindful practices such as breath meditation, walking meditation and mindful movement have been demonstrated to have positive impacts on the behaviour of people of all ages from school to lifelong learning (Burnett, 2011; Langer, 2003; Hyland, 2011). On the basis of fifteen years of utilising mindfulness techniques in American schools and colleges, Schoeberlein and Sheth (2009) argue that:

Mindfulness promotes resilience and enhances social and emotional competence. Mindfulness combined with empathy, kindness and compassion supports constructive action and caring behaviour. Living mindfully begets greater mindfulness. The more you practice, the more mindfulness will infuse your experience of life, work and relationships (p. 178).

The suggestion—in both Buddhist contemplative traditions and modern therapeutic interpretations—is that the practice of mindfulness leads naturally to the moral principles underpinning the noble eightfold path (Keown, 2005). Direct connections are made between the inner clarity that Siegel (2010) calls ‘mindsight’—the ‘focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds’ (p. xi)—and the foundations of morality. This is brought out clearly in Kabat-Zinn’s (2005) discussion of mindfulness and the moral life. As he suggests, the ‘wholesome mind and body states’ resulting from the practice include:
Generosity, trustworthiness, kindness, empathy, compassion, gratitude, joy in the good fortune of others, inclusiveness, acceptance and equanimity . . . [which] . . . are qualities of mind and heart that further the possibilities of well-being and clarity within oneself, to say nothing of the beneficial effects they have in the world. They form the foundation for an ethical and moral life (p. 103).

All this seems both over-simplistic and not quite complete. We feel the same uneasiness here when faced with such notions as the Socratic idea that the truly wise man can never commit evil or that complete faith in God’s goodness will guarantee a morally just society. Moreover, what of Aristotle’s discussion of *akrasia*—examined in painstaking detail from a moral education perspective by Straughan (1982)—and the inevitable gap between thoughts, intentions and actions?

Many of these dilemmas have been raised in recent literature in response to Harris’ *The Moral Landscape* (2010) which posits the idea that moral problems can be solved in just the same way that scientific or other everyday questions are answered: by observation, clarity of thought and commonsense reasoning. However, since Harris—like many philosophers and psychologists such as Dennett (2003) and Blackmore (2011)—is attached to some form of deterministic account of human volition and action, the question of how we can ever make truly free, voluntary and autonomous judgments and actions still has to be addressed. Blackmore (2011) expresses the key issues simply and graphically:

The basic problem has been around for thousands of years both in Western philosophy and in Buddhism. That is, everything that happens is caused by something else . . . This means there is no sense to the idea of free will: no sense to the idea that I can jump in and consciously decide to do something without prior causes, just because I want to. If that happened, it would be magic, implying that conscious actions lie outside the web of interconnectedness. Yet I feel as though I can act freely. Indeed, this magical view is probably how most people in most cultures have always thought about themselves . . . (p. 137).

Moreover, recent studies in neuroscience have cast doubt on the concept of a centre of consciousness, a central and unified ‘self’ or ‘I’ directing all aspects of our behaviour. Blackmore (2005) discusses the counter-intuitive idea that—although we make the standard assumption that there is a unified centre to all our acts and
experiences—this feeling is not supported by studies of consciousness. Neuroscientific research indicates that there are many facets of consciousness which can be linked to different brain states but little evidence of brain states which correspond to a single entity or source of consciousness. Certain fundamental assumptions—such as the notion of a fixed and unchanging self located in a conscious mind through which flow a ‘stream of ideas, feelings, images and perceptions’—have, according to Blackmore (2005), to be ‘thrown out’ (p. 128). So how are we to proceed? Blackmore suggests that we:

... start again with a new beginning. The starting point this time is quite different. We start from the simplest possible observation. Whenever I ask myself ‘Am I conscious now?’, the answer will always be ‘yes’. But what about the rest of the time? The funny thing is that we cannot know. Whenever we ask the question we get an answer—yes—but we cannot ask about those times when we are not asking the question (p. 128).

Even more intriguing is the ground-breaking work by Libet (2003) using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanning techniques which indicates that activity in the brain’s motor sections—when subjects are asked to perform actions or respond to sights, sounds or touches—actually precedes consciousness of such perceptions. If consciousness follows awareness, perception and behaviour, therefore, how can such activity be said to have been caused by consciousness? Moreover, if we are not in complete conscious control of our thoughts and actions, does this not imply that we cannot be held accountable for them since they are in some sense determined by factors outside our control?

Although the Buddha argued against fatalism (Harvey, 2007) the notions of freedom, determinism or indeterminism are rather too metaphysical and theoretical to play a predominant role in the essentially pragmatic project of understanding and relieving suffering. Indeed, it should be noted that if the complete Buddhist project—the full journey along the Noble Eightfold Path to achieve nirvana and awakening—is completed, then the idea of free will or not free will becomes redundant and irrelevant. Since nirvana may be defined technically as the ‘complete silencing of concepts . . . the extinction of all notions’ (Hanh, 1999, pp. 136–7)—enlightenment would clearly obviate all speculation about free will. It is also worth noting the observation of Maex (2013) that:

Ethics in Buddhism is completely different from what we are used to in the West in that it is defined in relation to suffering:
wholesome is what leads to wellbeing, unwholesome is what leads to suffering. Put in this way even ethics becomes a testable hypothesis. And, of course, it is a cornerstone of Western medicine in the Hippocratic Oath and its injunction, *primum non nocere* (p. 169).

In terms of Western moral philosophy, Buddhism may be characterised as ‘virtue ethics . . . because Buddhism is first and foremost a path of self-transformation that seeks the elimination of negative states (vices) and their replacement by positive or wholesome ones’ (Keown, 2005, p. 25). This transformative perspective is present—not just in the populist writings on the practice (Hanh, 1999; Gunaratana, 2002; Dalai Lama, 2005)—but also in the therapeutic applications of mindfulness in education, health and psychotherapy.

In virtue ethics—unlike deontological and utilitarian systems—there is less of a problem concerning *akrasia* and the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. The whole point of mindfulness is centrally instantiated within the practice itself and realised through the pursuit of wholesomeness, wisdom, compassion and, ultimately, awakening and the escape from suffering. As Gunaratana (2002) puts it, ‘mindfulness alone has the power to reveal the deepest level of reality available to human observation’ (p. 144), an observation echoed in Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1999) idea that:

Mindfulness helps us look deeply into the depths of our consciousness . . . When we practice this we are liberated from fear, sorrow and the fires burning inside us. When mindfulness embraces our joy, our sadness, and all our mental formations, sooner or later we will see their deep roots. Mindfulness shines its light upon them and helps them to transform (p. 75).

Linking all this to the possibility of human freedom, Repetti (2010) observes that:

In meditation, one practises freedom while being pushed or pulled by first-order mental fluctuations and volitions and pushing or pulling back against their currents. Meditation is a practice behaviour, like weight lifting, that gradually enhances mental freedom the more one meditates *in action*—when ‘chopping wood and carrying water,’ as a Buddhist adage has it. Each Meditation adds a metaphorical ‘quantum of mental freedom’ to the increasingly-free meditative mind, akin to a grain of sand added to others in the construction of a heap (p. 195).
The fostering of freedom and the wholesome virtues is, thus, a developmental and cumulative process on all fours with the educational enterprise in general (Hyland, 2014b), and this serves to reinforce the importance of connecting contemporary MBIs in education with the foundational principles and values of mindfulness strategies, especially those concerned with alleviating suffering and transforming unwholesome emotions.

**SEcularism, Spirituality and Mindfulness**

Carr (1996) has usefully examined a number of rival conceptions of spirituality such as the Kantian notions of wonder, awe, the sublime and the ineffable which may also be connected with aesthetic and affective psychological and intellectual processes. Certainly, the notion of diverse traditions and approaches to spirituality is an important one for educators in a multicultural and increasingly secular society (Hyland, 2013), and Wringe’s conception of the enhancement of the ‘pupil’s non-material well-being’ (2002, p. 167) as a general objective of spiritual education has much to commend it.

Harris (2014) has argued cogently for a non-mystical, naturalistic conception of spirituality rooted in the investigation of consciousness and, indeed, it does seem to be the case that certain forms of consciousness are what unite different versions of spirituality. Referring to the spiritual practices of contemplation and meditation associated particularly with the Buddhist traditions, Harris (2006) describes them in terms of ‘investigating the nature of consciousness directly through sustained introspection’ (p. 209). Elaborating upon this conception, he observes that:

> Investigating the nature of consciousness directly, through sustained introspection, is simply another name for spiritual practice. It should be clear that whatever transformations of your experience are possible—after forty days and forty nights in the desert, after twenty years in a cave, or after some new serotonin agonist has been delivered to your synapses—these will be a matter of changes occurring in the contents of your consciousness (Harris, 2010, pp. 209–210).

In his debate with quantum physicist, Mlodinow, about the different claims and evidence bases of science and spirituality, Chopra (Chopra and Mlodinow, 2011) is concerned to place a similar emphasis on the central role of certain forms of consciousness within Eastern spiritual
traditions. In referring to what he calls the dilemma of scientific materialism which, on the one hand, has brought so much improvement to the quality of human life but, on the other, has led to ‘endless consumption, exploitation of natural resources and the diabolical creativity of warfare’, Chopra argues that:

Religion cannot resolve this dilemma: it has had its chances already. But spirituality can. We need to go back to the source of religion. That source isn’t God. It’s consciousness. The great teachers who lived millennia ago ... offered a way of viewing reality that begins not with outside facts and a limited physical existence, but with inner wisdom and access to unbounded awareness (ibid., p. 6).

This point is elaborated through the observation that:

The difference between a spiritual life and every other life comes down to this. In spirituality, you find out what the mind really is. Consciousness explores itself, and far from reaching a dead end, the mystery unravels. Then and only then does wisdom blossom ... The mind has looked deeply into itself and discovered its source ... (ibid., p. 225).

The project of introspection and contemplation—of finding out ‘what the mind really is’—referred to in different ways by Harris and Chopra is at the very heart of Buddhist philosophy and practice. The Buddha famously claimed that he ‘taught one thing and one thing only; that is, suffering and the end of suffering’ (Salzberg and Goldstein, 2001, p. 123) and the practice of mindfulness has a principal place in this overarching process of alleviating suffering in ourselves and others. Moreover, this is essentially a practical project in which secular spirituality is connected with pragmatic ends. As Harris (2014) puts it, the:

... realistic goal of spiritual practice is not some permanent state of enlightenment that admits of no further efforts but a capacity to be free in this moment, in the midst of whatever is happening. If you can do that, you have already solved most of the problems you will encounter in life (p. 50).

In their use of mindfulness in approaches to mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) treatments for depression, Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002), for example, observe that:
Mindfulness lies at the core of Buddhist meditative practices, yet its essence is universal. It has to do with refining our capacities for paying attention, for sustained and penetrative awareness, and for emergent insight that is beyond thought but that can be articulated through thought (p. viii).

Kabat-Zinn (2005) one of the most influential contemporary proponents of secular or therapeutic mindfulness, similarly appeals to the universality of mindfulness notions whilst at the same time paying homage to what might be called its natural home. He observes that ‘mindfulness, which can be thought of as openhearted, moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, is optimally cultivated through meditation’ and ‘its most elaborate and complete articulation comes from the Buddhist tradition’. However, he is at pains to state that ‘I am not a Buddhist’ but, rather, a ‘student of Buddhist meditation, and a devoted one, not because I am devoted to Buddhism per se, but because I have found its teachings and its practices to be so profound and so universally applicable, revealing and healing’ (pp. 25–26).

Contemporary therapeutic applications of mindfulness in mind-body medicine, psychotherapy and education (Siegel, 2007; Schoeberlein and Sheth, 2009) are unequivocally secular in all senses of the term in that their aims are, as suggested earlier, essentially pragmatic and seek to re-interpret the original spiritual roots of mindfulness in adapting them to therapeutic and developmental purposes. Moreover, against the background of the secular spirituality described above it could be argued that the original Buddhist project itself is substantially pragmatic, therapeutic and secular in nature, concerned with alleviating suffering in ourselves and others (Batchelor, 2011; Bazzano, 2014). Kabat-Zinn (1990) was initially concerned to emphasise the secular nature of mindfulness so as to guard against the possible alienation of religious groups and, in the light of the growth of MBIs in schools and colleges in the US and Europe, such an emphasis may well be worth maintaining.

As Billington (1997) explains, the ‘typically Western idea of God is absent from the majority of expressions of Eastern religion or philosophy’ (p. 9), and Buddhism is a prime example of this. In describing the Buddhist eightfold path, for example, Batchelor (1998) insists that ‘there is nothing particularly religious or spiritual about this path’ and that ‘it encompasses everything we do. It is an authentic way of being in the world’ (p. 10). More recently (2011, 2012) he has suggested that secular Buddhism can be justified and supported by the original
Pali teachings of the Buddha as these are disentangled from the quasi-divine embellishments which Buddhism borrowed from Hinduism and Jainism. He insists that:

Above all, secular Buddhism is something to do, not something to believe in . . . ‘Enlightenment’, therefore—though I prefer ‘awakening’—is not a mystical insight into the true nature of mind or reality, but rather the opening up of a way of being-in-this-world that is no longer determined by one’s greed, hatred, fear and selfishness (2012, p. 19).

This secular spirit is echoed in Seth Segall’s (2003) assertion that ‘Buddhism is a form of radical empiricism. The Buddha taught that one should not take his word on his authority, but that one should see things for oneself’ (p. 92). In this respect, both the Dalai Lama (2005) and Hanh (2012) have been especially concerned to highlight the connections and intersections between fundamental Buddhist concepts and the findings of modern science. As Hanh (2012) explains in relation to the Buddhist and scientific search for meaning and understanding:

Each of us needs a spiritual dimension to our daily life. If we lack a spiritual dimension, it may be very difficult for us to overcome the challenges and difficulties we encounter. As scientists we also need a spiritual life. This spiritual life should be based on evidence, which can be verified, not on esoteric beliefs which cannot be tested (p. 82).

This emphasis on secular spirituality also brings with it a secular approach to morality as this is revealed in the ethical underpinnings of mindfulness in both ancient contemplative and modern therapeutic perspectives (Keown, 2005). The important point about this value basis is that it is claimed to be universally humanist rather than exclusively Buddhist. As the most influential advocate of the contemporary approach, Kabat-Zinn (2003) explains in relation to the dharma:

[D]harma is at its core truly universal, not exclusively Buddhist. It is neither a belief, an ideology, nor a philosophy. Rather, it is a coherent phenomenological description of the nature of mind, emotion, and suffering and its potential release, based on highly refined practices aimed at systematically training and cultivating various aspects of mind and heart via the faculty of mindful attention (p. 145).
It is this foundation of universal values—combined with specific and easily accessible strategies for cultivating mindfulness—which have recommended contemporary MBIs to educators at all levels.

MINDFULNESS, LEARNING AND EDUCATION: DEVELOPMENTS AND ISSUES

Developments

The secular applications of mindfulness inspired by the work of Kabat-Zinn and associates have been especially welcomed by educators concerned to address spiritual, ethical and affective dimensions of learning/teaching which are thought to have been marginalised by contemporary instrumentalist conceptions of the educational task (Siegel, 2007; Burnett, 2011; Hyland, 2011, 2013). There are direct and practical links between mindfulness strategies and educational practice at all levels. The ‘present-moment reality’ developed through mindfulness is widely acknowledged in educational psychology as not just ‘more effective, but also more enjoyable’ (Langer, 2003, p. 43) in many spheres of learning, and there is now a wealth of evidence aggregated through the Mindfulness in Education Network (http://www.mindfuled.org) about the general educational benefits of the approach (for an account of the potential impact of mindfulness strategies on curriculum and pedagogy, see Oren Ergas’s chapter in this book). On the basis of work done in American schools, Schoeberlein and Sheth (2009) list a wide range of benefits of mindfulness for both teachers—improving focus and awareness, increasing responsiveness to student needs, enhancing classroom climate—and students, in supporting readiness to learn, strengthening attention and concentration, reducing anxiety and enhancing social and emotional learning. As they put it:

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 (p. xi).

The use of mindfulness in British schools is showing similarly promising results. Burnett (2011) has shown its value when incorporated into moral/religious education or personal and social health programmes (PSHE), and the controlled trial conduct by Huppert and Johnson (2010) with 173 secondary school pupils indicated a positive impact of
mindfulness-based approaches on emotional stability and an increase of wellbeing. The therapeutic applications of mindfulness strategies were recommended in the report sponsored by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, *Mental Capital and Wellbeing* (Government Office for Science, 2008), and there are a number of well-established centres for the research and teaching in mindfulness-based approaches: the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice at the University of Wales, Bangor (www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness), the Oxford Cognitive Therapy Centre (www.octc.co.uk), and the University of Exeter (www.exeter.ac.uk). More recently, a report by the *All Party Parliamentary Group on Well Being Economics* (New Economics Foundation, 2014) devoted a whole chapter to mindfulness and recommended that ‘mindfulness should be incorporated into the basic training of teachers and medical students’ (p. 32).

In addition to the studies noted above, a body of educational research evidence is beginning to emerge from the UK Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP; Burnett, 2011). A project undertaken in secondary schools connected with the MiSP (officially called the .b project) by Hennelly (2011), involving 64 mixed gender pupils reported that mindfulness training brought about immediate improvements in adolescents’ functioning and well-being and (on the basis of a questionnaire survey conducted six months after experience on the .b programme) established that these positive effects were maintained. More recently, a large-scale experimental project conducted by Kuyken *et al.* (2013) investigated the impact of mindfulness training in a study involving a total of 522 young people aged 12–16 in 12 secondary schools connected with the MiSP initiative. The results indicated that the pupils who participated in the intervention reported fewer depressive symptoms post-treatment and at follow-up, and lower stress and greater wellbeing at follow-up. The degree to which students in the intervention group practised the mindfulness skills was associated with better wellbeing and less stress after a 3-month follow-up. Many of these positive benefits of MBIs in education have been confirmed in the meta-analysis and review of recent research in the field by Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz and Walach (2014).

**Issues**

However, both the nature of such educational applications and the ways in which they are being evaluated presents a number of potential problems and challenges for anyone committed to forms of mindfulness which seek to retain connections with the Buddhist principles which inspire them. The principal tensions and conflicts may be illustrated
by reference to the recent critiques of what Purser and Loy (2013) have labelled ‘McMindfulness’. As they express the key issues:

The mindfulness revolution appears to offer a universal panacea for resolving almost every area of daily concern . . . Almost daily, the media cite scientific studies that report the numerous health benefits of mindfulness meditation and how such a simple practice can effect neurological changes in the brain (p. 1).

The upshot of all this, inevitably, is a marginalisation of the original foundational principles and a distortion of the ultimate aims and procedures. As Purser and Loy conclude:

While a stripped-down, secularized technique—what some critics are now calling ‘McMindfulness’—may make it more palatable to the corporate world, decontextualizing mindfulness from its original liberative and transformative purpose, as well as its foundation in social ethics, amounts to a Faustian bargain. Rather than applying mindfulness as a means to awaken individuals and organizations from the unwholesome roots of greed, ill will and delusion, it is usually being refashioned into a banal, therapeutic, self-help technique that can actually reinforce those roots (ibid).

It needs to be said that the inclusion of mindfulness in US army training regimes and by Google in staff development programmes (Stone, 2014; Eaton, 2014) clearly raises issues about the misuse and, in some cases, outright abuse of MBIs since foundational mindfulness values such as right livelihood, loving-kindness, compassion and non-materialism are self-evidently and fundamentally at odds with aspects of the core business of corporations and the military. Criticising what he calls the ‘militarization of mindfulness’ in the establishment of mindfulness-based fitness programmes by the US army, Purser (2014) points to the preposterous absurdity of divorcing mindfulness from its ethical foundations of compassionate non-harming in order to train soldiers to be more alert and efficient. Similarly, the use of mindfulness training to boost productivity, increase profits and encourage consumer materialism is no less outrageous and oxymoronic. Bazzano (2014) suggests that contemporary McMindfulness programmes have come to represent ‘a quick fix for the anxieties of late-capitalist society’ (p. 164), and this must be an area of some concern for those involved in the educational applications of MBIs (the commercialisation
of mindfulness is also referred to by Aislinn O’Donnell in this book).

On another level, the wholesale expropriation of MBIs by academic psychologists and mind-body health professionals—reflected in the ever-expanding academic publications noted earlier—has exacerbated the ‘decontextualisation’ referred to by Purser and Loy by transmuting mindfulness practice into just another academic field of study. The overwhelming majority of such academic publications involve the quantitative measurement of mindfulness (Baer, 2013)—the mutation of present-moment ‘being’ into outcome-oriented ‘doing’. Such developments have led to a proliferation of mindfulness measurement scales, including the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS), and the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) (Mindfulness Research Guide, 2014; http://www.mindfulexperience.org/ measurement). All of these scales are connected with the various benefits of MBIs in the areas of depression, addiction, and mind-body wellbeing, and it is such evidence-based positive results of the strategies which, according to Baer (2013), both justify such measurement and explain their consistent influence. As she concludes:

Adaptations from the original Buddhist teachings may be necessary, and intended and unrecognised conceptual slippage may be hard to avoid. On balance, however, the benefits seem to outweigh the difficulties (p. 258).

All these developments—and the ‘conceptual slippage’ referred to by Baer—means that contemporary MBIs are quite some way from both the Buddhist home of mindfulness and also the original secular therapeutic aims. Kabat-Zinn’s evaluation of all these developments is, naturally, both interesting and informative. Since his original work on the MBSR programme has spawned the current mindfulness revolution, Kabat-Zinn’s criticisms of contemporary developments are understandably nuanced. Acknowledging the ‘challenging circumstances relating to the major cultural and epistemological shifts’ as Buddhist meditation was introduced into clinical and psychological settings, Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2013) observe that:

Buddhist scholars, in particular, may feel that the essential meaning of mindfulness may have been exploited, or distorted, or abstracted from its essential ecological niche in ways that may threaten its deep meaning, its integrity, and its potential value (p. 11).
The answer to such challenges is the ‘building of bridges with an open mind’ (ibid., p. 12) between all Western and Buddhist perspectives. More fundamentally, all those concerned with mindfulness practice—teachers, trainers, practitioners, and academic researchers—should be aware at all times of the ‘ethical foundation of MBSR’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 294) and its roots in the universal dharma of loving-kindness, compassion and the relief of suffering in ourselves and others. Thus, Kabat-Zinn is not opposed to assessing mindfulness per se—after all, its recent growth has been underpinned by research evidence of various kinds as outlined earlier—but only that which fails to respect the ethical foundations and essential principles.

It tends to be the development of the scales outlined earlier that cause certain commentators on contemporary trends—Grossman is notable in this respect—to be rather more strident in their criticisms of both the new directions taken by secular therapeutic mindfulness strategies in general and the quantification of mindfulness in particular. Since the exponential development of the mindfulness industry, Grossman (2011) has been forceful in his criticisms of mindfulness measurement scales, particularly those relying upon self-reports by MBI course participants. The key weaknesses are that they de-contextualise mindfulness from its ethical and attitudinal foundations, measure only specific aspects of mindfulness such as the capacity to stay in the present moment, attention span or transitory emotional state and, in general terms, present a false and adulterated perspective on what mindfulness really is. Such developments are of little value to any of the interested parties whether they are learners, teachers, mindfulness practitioners or external agencies interested in the potential benefits of MBIs. The position is summed up well by Grossman:

> Our apparent rush to measure and reify mindfulness—before attaining a certain depth of understanding—may prevent us from transcending worn and familiar views and concepts that only trivialize and limit what we think mindfulness is. The scientific method, with its iterative process of re-evaluation and improvement, cannot correct such fundamental conceptual misunderstandings but may actually serve to fortify them (2011, p. 1038).

The proliferation of mindfulness scales which has accompanied the exponential growth of programmes has exacerbated this denaturing of the original conception, and it is now no longer clear precisely what is being measured. As Grossman and Van Dam (2011) note, such developments may prove counter-productive and unhelpful to all those working in the field. They argue further that:
Definitions and operationalizations of mindfulness that do not take into account the gradual nature of training attention, the gradual progression in terms of greater stability of attention and vividness of experience or the enormous challenges inherent in living more mindfully, are very likely to misconstrue and banalize the construct of mindfulness, which is really not a construct as we traditionally understand it in Western psychology, but at depth, a way of being (ibid., p. 234).

Along with the gradualness of mindfulness development, this ‘way of being’ is not susceptible to summative psychological testing. Instead, Grossman and Van Dam recommend formative assessment techniques employing longitudinal interviews and observations of MBI participants in specific contexts. More significantly, they go on to make the eminently sensible suggestion that ‘one viable option for preserving the integrity and richness of the Buddhist understanding of mindfulness might be to call those various qualities now purporting to be mindfulness by names much closer to what they actually represent’ (ibid., p. 234).

The many educational benefits of mindfulness—the fostering of inner knowing, emotional resilience and a rationally justifiable moral and spiritual vision—could easily be lost in a superficial implementation of mindfulness which is divorced from the universal dharma advocated by Kabat-Zinn and others (Bazzano, 2014). What Batchelor (2014) has called ‘the experience of the everyday sublime’ (p. 37) which may result from mindfulness practice is far too important to be lost through the pursuit of short-term outcomes but requires the longitudinal perspective characteristic of the development of knowledge and understanding in general. Olendzki (2010) provides a succinct mission statement for such an educational project in his observation that:

The goal of becoming a better person is within the reach of us all, at every moment. The tool for emerging from the primitive yoke of conditioned responses to the tangible freedom of the conscious life lies just behind our brow. We need only invoke the power of mindful awareness in any action of body, speech or mind to elevate that action from the unconscious reflex of a trained creature to the awakened choice of a human being who is guided to a higher life by wisdom (p. 158).

This is a noble educational project which has very little in common with the reductionist instrumentalism of McMindfulness schemes. It
is fully in accordance with what Peters (1973) famously referred to as the lifelong educational journey whereby ‘mere living is transformed into a quality of life’ (p. 20).

REFERENCES

Eaton, J. (2014) Gentrifying the Dharma: How the 1 Percent is Hijacking Mindfulness, Salon, 5 March. Available at: http://www.salon.com/2014/03/05/gentrifying_the_dharma_how_the_1_is_hijacking_mindfulness/, accessed 6 September 2014.
On the Contemporary Applications of Mindfulness


T. Hyland


