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Chapter 9

MINDFULNESS: A GIFT TO PSYCHOLOGY?

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Understand with wisdom
Be wise with understanding
Sepher Yetzirah

INTRODUCTION

Can man be regarded as a complex, layered being, with a biological, a psychological and a spiritual aspect which are interrelated? Layers that permeate each other, that can be distinguished but not separated? Does the concept of freedom of choice connect to this? Can thoroughly thinking about mindfulness and research on it throw light on these issues? The purpose of this paper is to give some answers to the questions above.

By considering essential characteristics of mindfulness, theoretical aspects on different levels of abstraction and by describing the effects of the practice on a psychological level and a spiritual level, we intend to give evidence for the interrelation of these layers, and thereby of the layering itself. Mindfulness stems from contemplative spiritual traditions and it is a core element of it. It is

interesting to see that the practice of mindfulness in a spiritual perspective and in a psychological perspective correspond with one another. By using the concept of ‘correspondence’ we indicate a comparable underlying structure. We will mark the significant points of distinction and transition between mindfulness in a spiritual and a psychological context and we will discuss the concept of the soul in this context.

Man being a layered being living in a layered world, is not a new idea. In fact, it is possibly one of the oldest ideas about our existence that has been thought since human thinking advanced. Actually it is still in many cultures a dominating idea in everyday life. In its biological aspect man obviously has the least freedom of choice. All human bodies resemble each other and in this aspect mankind still resembles his animal nature. In its psychological and spiritual aspect life of man can be seen as less or more or even totally different from the animal way of life. In these aspects, indeed, there seems to be a freedom of choice.

Mindfulness, since it has attracted so much scientific interest in the last decades, could be conceived as a gift to the science of psychology. Psychology, especially in this period, has directed itself, in its theorizing and methods of research, strongly to the relative observable, mechanical, outward and instinctive aspects of mankind. Evolutionary psychology, behavior therapy and in part cognitive behavior therapy, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the method of randomized controlled designs of research and the strong interest in genetics, neuro-psychology and the working of the brain, they all breathe a strong, and sometimes rigid, conviction that psychology should follow the concept of science and the methods of research of the natural sciences: the sciences of the material side and the mechanical aspects of life where all building blocks are alike and the laws relatively simple. It has brought us a lot of knowledge about how the average, conditioned, man behaves, but little about other more unique and subtle qualities in man and in his relating with others.

We think that thinking about the essence of mindfulness and evidence coming from research about it, reopens a view, which gradually has been lost, in which man can be regarded as more than an accidentally advanced animal, indeed endowed with possibilities which give him a freedom of choice, a sense of meaning about an inherent unity of everything in existence and a key to acquiring peace. In this way, mindfulness, supported by scientific evidence, could become of immense value for the well-being of future mankind, and can be regarded as a phenomenon with transformative potential in the evolution of man in respect to his natural, conditioned ‘animal-way’ of life.

A FIRST INTRODUCTORY EXPLORATION

Can We Define Meditation and Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a relatively recent concept, closely associated with meditation. There are an impressive number of definitions for the term 'meditation', a strong indication that it functions as a container-concept, making it useless to try to come up with one exact definition. Fortunately it does not seem unreasonable to draw a few generally accepted distinguishing lines, as all definitions seem to have a few characteristics in common, such as stopping automatic behavior and a reflective attitude.

In the broad field of meditation a distinction is often made between on the one hand meditation in a strict sense and on the other hand contemplation. Meditation can be viewed as an active process of being attentive and it involves an internal effort to self-regulate and calm the mind. Contemplation concerns an effortlessly receptive way of being aware. It requires a stable attention that is attained during the practice of meditation.

This parallels two types of meditation practice: a type aiming at concentrated and focused attention and a type aiming, in an open and purely receptive way, at being attentive to all events that enter the field of awareness without concentrating on any of them.

In this article we base ourselves on the definition of Jon Kabat-Zinn [2] who stated that 'mindfulness is a skill and attitude of non-judgmentally and purposefully paying attention in the present moment'. 'Non-judgmental' has two aspects: a mental aspect and an aspect of compassion. It is generally developed by meditation practice and leads to a state of awareness. It confronts us with an intriguing and often paradoxical phenomenon which in some respects upsets the ordinary, especially the Western, way of looking at life.

Mindfulness, an Evolutionary Step?

In a state of awareness one goes beyond the dualities. On a psychological level one goes beyond the dualities of everyday life: one-sided identifying and thinking in opposites. On a spiritual level one goes beyond the subject-object duality. Can the practice of meditation, the act of attaining a mindful attitude, be conceived of as a further step in the development of man and the evolution

of human consciousness? The specific qualities of mindfulness are such that they place one beyond one's basic evolutionary and functional mechanisms of attraction and avoidance, (i.e., seeking satisfaction and avoiding pain), which are characteristic of our instinctive behavior.

The way animals cope with life, can be conceived of as having an instinctive orientation aimed at the survival of oneself or one's group. In the evolution of humans there has been a gradual development. Notions of empathy, justice, morality, also found with primates, have been developed. There is also richness in the ability of self-reflection and symbolizing. Although these forms of reflection resemble some aspects of mindfulness, making it possible to attain a certain freedom of choice, human behavior still generally remains conditioned by the pressure of the immediacy of life's circumstances. We believe it is not an exaggeration to claim that man throughout history, because of this pressure and conditioning especially in stressful situations, has been coping with existence by identifying with one side, concept or group, while suppressing the other, hardly being able to integrate more sides of a truth, and losing freedom as a consequence. As a result we see in many cultures that women are suppressed and men favored, sexuality suppressed in the context of religious beliefs, ideas and religious beliefs suppressed in the context of certain ideologies and so on. We see it also reflected in the inner life of modern man himself, when, struggling with inner conflicts, he is led to suppress parts of himself.

Mindfulness, in our view, can be regarded as the key to the maintenance of balance, development and peace [9] while dealing with duality. It prevents man from resorting to the one-sided identifications, which often result in insolvable conflicts, war and other kinds of suffering; it enables him to integrate and transcend them by detaching himself from the dominating influence of his instincts to survive, and from the conditioned behavior that results from it. Mindfulness allows man *freedom* in choosing how to relate to his existence and circumstances of life. Inherent to mindfulness is a compassionate attitude which also contrasts with an attitude primarily directed toward automatic identifying with self-interest, or the interest of one's social group. This enables him to transcend a state of merely existing as an entity formed by the mechanic course of evolution.

Psychology of an Organic Whole?

Mindfulness is not only a seemingly successful therapeutic device used in contemporary Western psychology. If one understands its core functionality and essence, one may recognize just through how many disciplines it actually crosses. In a sense, mindfulness forms a bridge between psychology and spirituality, and sheds new light on the relationship between the psychological, ethical, philosophical and metaphysical aspects of life.

Psychology is not an island in the world of science. On the contrary, it could be situated in the center, bordering all other fields of knowledge. In the last decades the focus of psychology has shifted, mainly due to the promises of the biological aspects of psychology, such as neuro-psychological knowledge, increasing insight into the function of the brain, theories stemming from evolutionary psychology and genetics. We think psychology, and in fact any science, can benefit from taking into account the organic whole of which it is an interrelated part. Throughout history there have been periods and cultures that considered the universe and human existence to be an integrated whole. This whole was differentiated into material-biological, psychological-mental and spiritual-ethical aspects, each subject to its own laws. This idea has gradually, and in recent times at an accelerating pace, been abandoned in modern science. However, the exploration of the essence and practice of mindfulness suggests that it could be wise to once again take an organic approach into account.

HISTORIC ROOTS OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness and meditation have their roots in traditions that are at least 2500 year old. Buddhism is the most well-known of these. Buddhism originates from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who was born in about 560 BC, in India. The preceding Indian tradition is remarkable as it is the oldest known expression of philosophizing about life and the relationship between an eternal and temporal aspect of life [10]. Generally in all ancient cultures there was a notion of one causing principle concealed behind everything existing. Buddhism can be described as a non-theistic religion. It has a metaphysical theory about the structure of the universe and life but no concept of a god creating the universe. As it spread from the northeastern region of the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism evolved into various

separate traditions, the most important of these are the Theravada, the Mahayana and the Vajrajana. All of these traditions had periods of expansion and contraction, as well as various schools and schisms and periods of increasing secularization and restoration. For the Theravada tradition meditation practice remained the most important aspect; in the Mahayana tradition the importance of compassion was gradually stressed as an integral part of it, formulated as ‘the explicit wish that others will also be free from suffering’, leading to the wish to help them.

Buddha devoted his life to help mankind liberate itself from suffering. The original teachings of the Buddha focus on the nature of suffering, the way to liberating oneself from suffering, and the denial of any permanency in existing forms, either in a self or in a soul. Starting from the observation that suffering is omnipresent and permeates life, he taught meditation as the main means of experientially gaining insight into reality as it is. By doing so, man could be liberated from illusions, the sources of suffering, and attain peace. The concept of liberation as expressed by the Buddha: “peace results from extinguished desire” was later often expressed in a more positive way: “a peace including happiness and a radiating state of mind”.

Apart from Buddhism, there are other spiritual and philosophical traditions in which comparable notions of the importance of a mindful attitude or meditation can be found in their core teachings. Forms of meditation are described in Hindu, Taoist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. We will address the Christian contemplative tradition, which flourished in the 4th century AD and is still present in monasteries, later. [11] Moreover, according to Hans-Joachim Storig and Bertrand Russell, the Greek Stoic philosophy, founded in the early 3rd century BC, which became very influential in the government of the Roman Empire, has significantly influenced many Western philosophers through the centuries. The Stoics taught that destructive emotions resulted from errors in judgment, comparable to Buddha’s teachings, obviously paralleling the theory behind cognitive therapy. They called someone a sage who developed this virtue of self-control and fortitude as a means of overcoming these destructive emotions, and they considered him as being truly free. In this context not only bad passions were condemned, but all passions. In the realm of interpersonal relationships they taught that even slaves should be accepted and loved as “equals of other men, because all men alike are products of nature”, universal love thought as a principle instead of an emotion. Later on, it led to doctrines which were softened by the humanity of its adherents [10-12]. This seems similar to Buddhism.

Recent History in the West

Apart from limited glimpses by Westerners who were traveling for commercial reasons, Buddhism did not come into contact with the West before the end of the 19th century. From then on it attracted only modest interest. Windy Dryden and Arthur Still [13], in a historic overview mention that after World War II there was an explosion of interest for Buddhism in the West, especially for Zen Buddhism and especially in the USA. After the Chinese invasion in Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism came to the West. The word 'mindfulness' in the context of Buddhist meditation practice became general by the work of Thich Nath Hahn in 1976 [14] about 'mindfulness in everyday life'. According to Dryden and Still, the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn [3] was the cause that (the term) mindfulness got such a large impact on Western psychotherapy and brought with it such a broad scientific interest. He demonstrated in the 1980s its beneficial application in mental health care. His mindfulness based training was meant to give the patients skills to come to peace with the inevitableness of their pain, by helping them on the one hand to stop their fruitless and destructive fighting against their pain and on the other hand to restore their sense of being a valuable person and to trust in their remaining possibilities; becoming compassionate with themselves and their pain.

He drew the word from its specialist use in Western Buddhism. He made clear that the practice was drawn from Buddhism, but made equally clear that his stress-management program was not a part of Buddhism, though anyone with a knowledge of Western Buddhism would recognize the word 'mindfulness'. This enabled Marsha Linehan [15] to incorporate it into her Dialectic Behavior Therapy in treating patients with a borderline personality disorder. Later John Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Mark Williams [5] adapted the training of Kabat-Zinn to their 'Mindfulness Based cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for the treatment of depression. They achieved only partial success till they realized that they had underestimated the importance of instructors to have their own mindfulness practice. During the 1980s and 1990s other writers like Steven Hayes [16] and Adrian Wells [17] were converging on practices similar to mindfulness. According to Dryden and Still the methods of all these and more recent writers share one striking feature. Instead of attacking symptoms as essentially negative and undesirable, the emphasis is on nonjudgmental acceptance and a focus on more positive alternatives. A nonjudgmental attitude sharply contrasts with the aversive attitude in traditional behavior therapy and also in Beck's concept of 'dysfunctional

thinking' [18], comparable to the aversive attitude to medical symptoms. Although in psychoanalysis some aspects bear some resemblance to mindfulness such as the kind of open attention of the therapist and the method of free association the context is rather normative and judgmental. Jungian analytic psychotherapy can be considered as acceptant to symptoms and especially in the humanistic psychology inspired by existential and phenomenological philosophy, with Carl Rogers [19] as an important representative, the non-judgmental attitude is a central characteristic in trying to understand the whole person. According to Dryden and Still, the influence of the humanistic tradition of psychotherapy was not so much directly on Kabat-Zinn but on those many psychologists and psychotherapists trained in a strictly evidence-based tradition, yet tempted by the accepting, nurturing approach offered by the humanistic tradition. Some psychotherapists, such as Steven Hayes with his Acceptance and Commitment Therapy were already bridging the gap between hard boiled science and humanistic therapy. [16]

Interest in mindfulness exploded because of its demonstrated benefits in mental health care, at first demonstrated by the work of Jon Kabat Zinn. [3] In the meantime there is strong evidence that it is effective in the treatment of depression [4,5,6,7] and it seems very promising in other fields of Western mental health care as well. [8]

For the sake of attaining its goal, Kabat-Zinn, in his pioneering, deliberately avoided mentioning explicit spiritual aspects. He, probably rightly, assumed this was beneficial for the acceptance of his training. Nevertheless, we think it is of significance that mindfulness training was developed in a context where psychological, ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical aspects were viewed as intimately connected to mental health.

ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MINDFULNESS

The principles of mindfulness have been described and taught in various ways in the contemplative branches of all great religious traditions over thousands of years as a way to attain a special state of consciousness: to be aware. Two important implications can be mentioned: being mindful means being in relation as well as being in the midst of reality. The purpose of mindfulness is not relaxation nor is there a direct psycho-therapeutic aim, although these can both be effects of it. The purpose is simply 'being aware'. A simple description of mindfulness could be 'being aware of what happens' and this can be applied to every possible situation. We find it in the '*mind your*

step' voice in subways or in airports that reminds us to pay attention or when traversing a busy street. But it just as well applies to coping healthily with anxiety, depressive thoughts and other difficult inner emotional states. And ultimately it applies to spiritual experiences and their meanings. In essence mindfulness is about *stopping* automatic behavior *and watching*. Of course, the situations mentioned above differ widely in complexity and therefore also in the quality and stability of mindfulness required. What are chief characteristics?

Not Attaching Oneself

An essential characteristic of mindfulness, which is counter-intuitive for our psyche in its natural conditioned state, can be expressed as 'not attaching oneself', meaning *not-identifying*, just watching in an impartial, non-judgmental way, while not suppressing any experience. Our natural way of being is just the opposite. We are by default set to attach ourselves in every way and every moment. First we are a baby attached to our mother, and later we are attached to our family, children, partners, possessions, ideals, habits, complaints, aggressors, feelings, thoughts, bodily sensations and so on. We attach ourselves automatically to all of these, identifying with them. We feel, more or less, one with them and experience little or no distance between ourselves and the experiences they evoke in us. It is our nature to be partial and judgmental. We like, want or believe some things, and we dislike, disbelieve and want get rid of other things. We show a common tendency towards dualism.

In general, we regard our inner experiences in only one way: we live with a conviction that we 'are' our feelings, thoughts, ideals, and bodily experiences. We are able to distance ourselves a bit more from outside phenomena. Why is our nature so oriented to this way of attaching and identifying? A plausible explanation could be that we evolved and became programmed this way because it was necessary for living and ultimately for our survival. It is intimately connected with the instinctive animal side of human beings. Instinctively, and thus automatically, we seek what we need to live and survive. We try to avoid pain and anxiety and seek what brings pleasure. For animals the only and evident way of life.

Master of One's Mind, Freedom of Choice

If in mindfulness practice one tries to remain unattached, one will necessarily get confronted with one's instinctive and natural ways of being. It will threaten one's feelings of being comfortable and safe. Why then has it been viewed traditionally, especially in the East, as the way to foster mental health? A main reason could be that paradoxically mindfulness allows one to become the master of one's mind, allowing one obviously more freedom of choice. This freedom fosters a kind of happiness that is intimately related to freedom although it disturbs the kind of instinctive desire for happiness with comfort as its foundation.

The relationship between mindfulness and freedom is self-evident. On the most practical level of 'mind your step', you are awakened from your automatic way of going and stopped for a moment. Watching the situation you have a better opportunity to choose your action. On a psychological level, when coping with problems, one can choose how to relate to one's negative thoughts, dreadful feelings, bodily pain and impulses. Staying aware of what is happening and watching, stopping one's automatic, instinctive or habitual way of reacting, of immediately trying to get rid of the unpleasantness and seeking one's comfort again. A mindful attitude creates this space for choosing, and makes one the psychological master over one's situation. It is important to mention that one is not free from the anxiety, pain or restrictions at a particular moment, but one feels free to relate to them in one's own chosen way. Feeling pain is not the same as suffering from pain. On a spiritual level one addresses the roots of the natural working of the mind: conceptualizing as such. Stopping the identification with conceptualization, becoming free of conceptualizing, brings a transformation and a new awakening. This awakening is generally called 'enlightenment', or a mystic experience, and described as coming in contact with a totally different level and quality of consciousness.

Generally man has an automatic and self-evident identification with one's experiences and, perhaps in particular in the Western way of life, with direct, concrete results. Reality becomes easily divided into good and bad aspects, success and failure. In the West, a successful treatment in medicine or psychotherapy is mostly identified by a concrete and fast disappearance or reduction of problems, pain and restrictions. Freedom in terms of mindfulness means freedom from the identification with these normative concepts of success and failure, and the associated reactions. This feeling of freedom and awareness of choice has a profound psychological impact on the suffering

people experience from physical or emotional pain, or from restrictions. It fosters self-efficacy.

Distancing and Connecting

Freedom and mastery originate from being able to distance oneself. Where there is no distance between things or phenomena, there is no space for freedom. In the Dialectic Behavior Treatment for borderline personality disorder [15], one speaks of *decentering*. Similarly, in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy one uses the term *defusing* [16], indicating that one should learn to differentiate components within the knots of feelings, automatic thoughts or impulses, and by doing so free oneself from automatic and often self-destructive reactions. Interestingly, these ways of creating distance also involve a new way of centering, from which a possibility arises of being able to choose for oneself.

A crucial point that is worth mentioning again is that this kind of freedom does not originate from taking away an obstruction or obstacle, but from ‘adding’ awareness. Whatever *is*, or *is happening*, at that certain moment, remains present in one’s awareness. By creating distance from identifying and reacting automatically one comes in touch with a space of freedom in oneself. A freedom involving a new center with a new type of connectedness. This connectedness is the basis of the sense of mastery over one’s choice.

‘Mind your step’ can awaken you to reconnect you with a central point or stance of will in yourself. When coping with psychological problems using meditation practice, one can experience a deep sense of being oneself, a center often associated with one’s heart. The basis of one’s wellbeing is a sense of self efficacy, which is in contrast to feeling like a victim or a slave of unwanted experiences or impulses. Generally, this sense expresses itself as a feeling of spontaneity, trust in oneself, or serenity. This phenomenon of distancing and reconnecting in respect to practice of mindfulness corresponds on an instinctive level to the well-known situation where a small child, while playing and exploring, distances itself from its mother without entirely losing within itself the connection with her. At the same moment and before it even has words to express what has happened, the child creates a space for itself in which it connects with a deeper center: a sense of being his own, a start of being an autonomous person on itself in a psychological sense.

These concepts of ‘being connected to a feeling of being oneself’, ‘one’s core’, or ‘one’s heart’ have little place in psychology nowadays.

When one stops one's automatic conditioned acting one watches what happens in oneself as if watching a mirror. One is merely observing all of a one's experiences, both inner and outer without evaluating, judging or interpreting. This is not easily understood in Western culture, especially when it concerns inner experiences. The term 'being aware' generally triggers interpretations, judgments and goals, even if the person is not aware of it. A training in mindfulness is therefore in several ways a counter-intuitive undertaking. Ultimately mindfulness aims, on the spiritual level, at a state of 'mere awareness', of becoming the mirror oneself. A comparable image would be a space containing everything that happens in it without being attached to it. Mindfulness practice then is being and experiencing one's body globally as a space, with breath going in and out, in which all kinds of things happen: emotions, thoughts and bodily sensations. These are observed without reacting to them or thinking about them. The person just watches what shows itself in the present, the 'now'. Ultimately, on the spiritual level, one experiences oneself as this space and there is no difference experienced anymore between the subject and the object.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Mindfulness in the Context of a Buddhist View on Life

Buddhism as a spiritual tradition has also a scientific and psychological aspect while starting with an exploration of human experiences themselves. Buddha himself is said to have insisted that one keep using one's critical discernment and discouraged that one blindly submit to authority, even his. This probably laid the groundwork for a search for reliable knowledge about psychological reality in Buddhism. It has produced a body of knowledge about psychological and spiritual phenomena, which are seen as intimately related.

Buddhist thinking reflects the general Eastern way of thinking, which is contextual and inclusive [20], regarding phenomena as interdependent in relation to an organic whole. In Buddhist psychology there is no inclination of separating psychological knowledge from philosophical and ethical considerations. All of these are seen as interrelated and are always to be considered in the context of their interdependent effects on mental health in the broadest sense. Buddhist psychology made use of a first person, a phenomenological perspective, for coming to objective knowledge. This in

contrast to modern psychology, especially in recent decades, that insists strongly on a third person, objectifying perspective. We will address the merits of these choices later on.

Buddhist mindfulness and meditation practice are embedded in a philosophy where life and our human condition is considered to be inherently colored by suffering caused by imperfectness and pain. This suffering (i.e., tension, anxiety, dis-contentedness and pain) is thought to be a result of natural desiring, craving and attaching, that is, wanting to keep the pleasant and the satisfying and get rid of the unpleasant. Their theory about suffering and the liberation of it is grounded on a few basic observations about existence: everything existing is a temporary composite and it will once be recycled: the atoms of our bodies have fulfilled many other functions in other composite forms in history. Our self, what we call 'I' is a temporary composite of identifications which forms itself continuously in exchange with surrounding influences and one's inborn temperamental characteristics. Nothing is permanent, at most there is a certain temporary stability. Only the present moment is to be considered as real, as the universe is a ceaseless stream of discontinuous moments of coming and going of being, a continuity of transiency.

It closely resembles the philosophical statements of Heraclitus, born around 540 BC, 20 years before Buddha. Heraclitus is famous for the statement "panta rei", "everything flows, nothing lasts"[9]. Suffering only ends when one stops identifying with these unstable and temporary forms, such as one's emotions, thoughts, possessions, and status. To be clear, this does not mean getting rid of anything, but instead it means loosening the clinging aspect, the fixation, the identification with these forms. If one acknowledges that they are merely fleeting experiences, one can deeply enjoy pleasant things in the moments they are present. As Shauna Shapiro et al. [21], says 'through this process we are actually able to connect more intimately with our moment-to-moment experience'. Further, one would not need to suppress thoughts or emotions, even negative ones, if they occur, but view and treat them with insight not identifying with them.

The ordinary state of the mind is regarded in Buddhism as imbalanced because people have incorrect ideas about this real nature of human existence. On a psychological level this is distinguished in being imbalanced regarding the direction of one's will, one's conceptions and ideas, one's emotional life or as an inability to maintain a stable focus. [22] Insight into reality as it is and the reality of human nature is needed to attain balance. Mindfulness and the practice of meditation are regarded as the main way to gain this insight, by

transcending one's natural, survival-driven attitude of dividing and fragmenting reality into supposedly stable good and bad parts. Put in a positive way, it is 'not what one takes hold of but what one releases that makes one rich and free'. It seems important to stress again that in no way does Buddhism teach that the natural driving forces of our instincts should be done away with. On the contrary, this is the energy of life itself. However, instead of being the slave to the destructive tendencies of conflicting forces, one can become psychologically the master of them.

According to Mahayana Buddhism, the conviction that one should act constructively with these forces, which means acting not only for the well-being of oneself, but also for others and the world, can be seen as something that follows logically from the assumptions that one should not attach and that everything and every person is interdependent in all aspects. Because practicing not-attaching is generally most difficult in coping with negative emotions, it follows that practicing to act compassionately and constructively when experiencing them touches the roots of these habits, therefore being the most effective way not to get caught by them. From the assumption that everything and every person is interdependent follows as a logical conclusion that suffering is caused by identifying with a specific part, separating this part from the whole. This also leads to the logical conclusion that one ought to act constructively and compassionately. A compassionate attitude corresponds of course with concepts such as 'loving one's neighbor' in Jewish-Christian culture, 'tolerance' in a humanistic context and 'universal love' in the Stoic tradition. In all of these contexts individuals are encouraged to imagine themselves in the position of the other, experience his or her need. By doing so trying to understand the other even when there is a tendency to avoid or to condemn. [10] These notions of compassion are considered as closely related to well-being.

The interrelated nature of the world is undisputed from a material and ecological perspective. The interrelatedness is also a core element in the spiritual dimension. In Christianity, for instance, this idea is described as 'everything is from God and in God'; in Buddhism it is in the metaphysical principle of karma, the law of cause and effect. [23] Could the psychological aspect of man also interrelated?

We will now take a look at characteristics of mindfulness from other angles on a level of higher abstraction. First, we will examine the function of mindfulness in relation to the characteristic working of the brain-hemispheres. Then we will discuss mindfulness in relation to two general modes of

processing experiences. Finally, we will look at its relationship to two basic cosmic forces.

Correspondences on the Level of Brain Structures: The Hemispheres

Recent neuro-psychological research concerning the working of the two hemispheres of the brain seems very relevant to two different modes of perceiving and the potential function of mindfulness. Despite the brain's great capacity to make connections and form relationships between both parts, there is a highly significant difference in how both parts work. [24,25] It has been demonstrated that the right hemisphere allows for the kind of attention required to see a picture of the whole, the 'Gestalt'. It is directed to new experience, looks at the world as complex, nuanced, ambiguous, and inseparably interconnected in its context. It recognizes what is non-verbal, metaphorical, symbolic and ironic, humorous, and the vast extent of what remains implicit. The right hemisphere functions in an inclusive way;

The left hemisphere, on the other hand, makes it possible for us to focus on detail, to deal very well with the predictable, to isolate parts and analyze them, to make things explicit and unambiguous. With the functions of the left hemisphere we can attain a degree of perfection, but at the cost of simplifying experiences and phenomena, and disconnecting them from the whole. The inclusive way of functioning of the right hemisphere means that it is also open to the knowledge contained in the left hemisphere. The left hemisphere, in contrast, functions by way of exclusion; it is not open to using the knowledge of the right hemisphere. It seems obvious that both modes are meant to cooperate in a complementary way, resulting in an integrated view on the whole and the parts. If we focus too much on concrete, measurable and countable differentiated aspects, we could overlook a lot; including any implicit knowledge of underlying concepts, which cannot be analyzed, and which enclose the, often symbolic, relationship between a range of situations. If we focus too much on the whole, we can't give explicit form to ideas or be productive.

One of the two hemispheres is usually dominant in a person or culture. The functions of the left hemisphere work excellently for exploring the material world. In exploring the meaningful aspects of life, however, it seems that they should be preceded by an overall view from the right hemisphere; the right hemisphere is apt to find the relevant words and concepts for enclosed, often symbolic, implicit meanings of phenomena; thereafter it is often

productive to analyze the concrete situations that relate to this meaning, while remaining aware of the context and the implicit meaning of the whole. A mindful attitude transcends the potential 'war' between these two functions, fought both within and between people.

Mindfulness in Relation to Two Basic Modes of Approaching Reality

In trying to explain the working of a mindful state regarding mental health, Segal et al. [5] and Williams [26,27] distinguished between two general modes of processing experiences. On the one hand, there is a conceptual and verbal modus, which is explicitly judging in an evaluating sense. It is goal oriented and focused on efficient problem solving. A solution is sought by analyzing input and working step by step towards a goal. Its starting point is always the evaluation that the situation at present is not good enough and not to be accepted. This mode maximizes our chances of realizing pleasant experiences, and avoiding or eliminating problems and discomfort. One could characterize this mode as a mode of 'acting following an evaluation'. In general, it works in us in an unceasingly automatic way.

On the other hand, they described a perceptual, experience-oriented mode, directed to 'just experience the present moment' without having a goal in mind. In this mode we don't evaluate with respect to a certain criterion, so it generates no problem-oriented, critical thinking to change or improve a situation. A situation is taken as it is. One could characterize this mode as a mode of 'being'.

The goal-oriented mode is a great instrument to solve practical and predictable problems. However, its tendency is to function automatically as a master of our mind with very problematic effects as a consequence. It often takes control when we are emotional and especially when we suffer from negative emotions, which are, of course, felt as unpleasant and therefore evaluated as unwanted. Unfortunately, it works inversely here by generating an internal conflict. One wants to get rid of a part of oneself, creating a duality or even a splitting inside oneself. One part becomes inimical to the unwanted experiences, another part of oneself.

Mindfulness and meditation practice enable us psychologically to attain a mastery over our mind, allowing us to shift in these situations to the experiential mode of being and, in general, to change modes so we can react adequately to different situations. The state of mindfulness is like being in the

center of ourselves, non-judgmentally and compassionately aware of what is happening, with a freedom of choice. The 'doing'-mode corresponds with a contracting aspect, narrowing one's mind for concentration on parts and details. The 'being' mode corresponds with the expanding, 'letting go and letting be' aspect of existence, widening one's mind. From the center one can keep or restore balance and optimize one's choice of actions according the given demands of a situation. Sociologically it seems evident that (North-) Western society, which is strongly directed toward productivity and economic prosperity, has a very positive, often one-sided, attitude to the doing mode, while in (South-) Eastern societies the mode of being is often more dominant.

Correspondences on the Level of Basic Forces in Existence

Mindfulness aims, at any level of practicing, at reconnecting oneself with an emotionally felt center around which all phenomena that one can be aware of revolve. This corresponds with our picture of the cosmos: a flood of ever further, differentiating phenomena and a primary point in time and space, or, more precisely, somewhere outside of time and space. The first relationship seems to be the one between a stillness of being in a center and a complex multitude of phenomena in motion, perhaps also corresponding to the relationship between 'being' and 'having' in ordinary life.

At the same moment, cosmically, a polarity of forces is showing itself within the world of phenomena: the contrasting forces of contracting and expanding. Polarity can be understood as an unbroken relationship with a continuous (creative) tension between the poles. The cosmic expanding force of all primary matter, which spreads it into space, is never separate from the forces of contraction, without which no forms could exist. It is this relationship that makes further differentiation of forms and phenomena possible. In the birth and development of forms of life we see the same principles working.

In human life we can see this polarity and accompanying tension, if one tries to find a balance between, on the one hand, the need to belong to others, to feel secure and to feel an identity and, on the other hand, the need to feel free, to go one's own way, and to express oneself.

Contraction and expansion correspond with the two basic types of exercises that are used for the meditation practice of mindfulness. Contrary to the cosmic explosion, the contracting 'focusing on one-point' meditations come first. These meditations foster concentration and require one to focus on one thing, often in trying to stay aware of one's breath, but it could be any

object. They strengthen ego-functions, necessary because the human mind is ‘undisciplined’. It is easily distracted by all fleeting phenomena, not having developed the ability to maintain a stable focus of attention. One can only temporarily maintain concentrated attention on one point. Then the contraction changes into an uncontrolled expansion again, as attention strays off. The instruction therefore is not to try to maintain concentration but to come back to focus as soon as you are aware of this expansion. It resembles breathing in and breathing out.

The growing ability to maintain focus makes it possible to practice the second type of meditation, which is called ‘insight-meditation’. Now the expanding force is allowed space. The instruction is to ‘direct one’s attention to all succeeding experiences from moment to moment (sounds, thoughts, sensations of pain etc.) while staying aware’. In staying aware, on this psychological level, one makes the effort of staying or returning to a center in oneself from which one observes, while being simultaneously in contact with one’s experiences.

So a never-ending process goes on in which one’s experiences come to a form at the foreground, contract, and then expand, losing their form and disappear into the background. There is no purpose to achieve a peaceful state or any particular state at all, only to stay aware, interested in, but not attached to any experience, watching in the center of one’s being and being in the center. If one identifies with the contracting force one can get, so to speak, imprisoned. On the other hand one can get lost if one identifies with the expanding force. With awareness one is able to maintain and return to an open contact with both.

If we connect these findings to our considerations thus far, there seem to be obvious correspondences between the contracting force, the mode of doing and the functioning of the left hemisphere, and similar connections between the mode of being, the expanding force and the working of the right hemisphere.

The Actual Working of Mindfulness

Well-known is the two-component model of mindfulness of Bishop et al. 2004. [28] The first component is the *regulation of attention* in order to maintain it on the immediate experience, and the second component involves approaching one’s experiences with an *orientation of openness*, curiosity, and

acceptance, regardless of their valence and desirability. It is noteworthy that the element of (self) compassion is lacking in an explicit way.

Holzel et al., 2011, [29], mentioning the relative paucity of theoretical reviews highlight four aspects that they believe to be the most important components.

Attention regulation emphasized in many meditation traditions to cultivate early in practice before moving on to other types of meditations.

Body awareness; taught as the first ‘foundation of mindfulness’ according to Theravada interpretations of Buddhist teachings. Body awareness has been ascribed a crucial role in the conscious experience of emotions and feelings, leading to a greater awareness of one’s emotional life and thus be very relevant for emotion regulation. It has also been suggested from self-report studies, to be an important precondition for empathic responses. Body sensations are a common object of attention during mindfulness meditation, and practitioners report improved body awareness. Neuro-scientific data on mindfulness practice point to the modification of brain regions involved in first-person conscious experience of body awareness.

Emotion regulation; including *reappraisal and exposure, extinction, and re-consolidation*. A variety of psychological disorders are associated with reduced emotion regulation capacity. A growing body of literature suggests that mindfulness practice results in improvements in emotion regulation supported by physiological evidence that meditation training leads to decreased emotional reactivity and facilitates a return to emotional baseline after reactivity.

Although there is evidence showing that mindfulness practice leads to increases in *positive reappraisal*, other work has shown that mindfulness practice leads to decreased cognitive control, interpreted as *non-appraisal*. This discrepancy brings Holzel et al. to light the question: Does emotion regulation during mindfulness involve cognitive control (and corresponding pre-frontal engagement), or is it characterized instead by its absence? Whereas the acceptance of one’s emotional response is characterized by the absence of active cognitive control over the emotional reaction, bringing mindful awareness to emotional responses might initially require some cognitive control, in order to overcome habitual ways of internally reacting to one’s emotions. Although currently speculative, it seems possible that *the degree of meditation expertise* of the individual might be relevant when considering the question of whether mindfulness involves cognitive control or its absence. Whereas beginners might require more active cognitive regulation in order to approach ongoing emotional reactions in a different way and might therefore

show greater pre-frontal activation, expert meditators might not employ this pre-frontal control but can take an receptive stance toward their experience so they no longer require cognitive control efforts, and they could have different baseline blood flow as a consequence.

Extinction plays a crucial role in producing the beneficial effects of mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation includes refraining from engaging in cognitive and experiential avoidance or other safety behaviors by using enhanced attention regulation skills, thereby maximizing the exposure to the experienced emotion. Additionally, meditation is often associated with high levels of relaxation. Holzel et al. end this part by stating that although it seems well established that mindfulness has positive effects on emotion regulation, the exact processes underlying these improvements seem less clear. Emotion regulation can be regarded as an umbrella term for a wide array of strategies for altering emotional responses.

The fourth aspect they mention is *change in perspective on the self*. Here they refer to what we already mentioned as the aspect of detachment and the essence of Buddhist psychology in the teaching that ‘there is no such thing as a permanent, unchanging self’ or ‘I’. Rather, the perception of a self or ‘I’ is a product of an ongoing mental process, reoccurring very rapidly in the stream of mental events, leading to the impression that the self or ‘I’ is a constant and unchanging entity, as being the one who inhabits the body, being the one who is thinking the thoughts, being the one experiencing emotions, and being the agent of actions; having free will’. It has been postulated that paying close attention to the transitory nature of this sense of self leads to the “deconstruction of the self”. In place of the identification with the static self, which causes from a Buddhist perspective our psychological distress, there emerges a tendency to identify with the phenomenon of “experiencing” itself. According to Buddhist philosophy, this change in perspective on the self is thus the key in the process to enduring forms of happiness as we mentioned before in this paper. We will focus on this drastic ‘dis-identification’ aspect of mindfulness later on, when we explore the correspondences and differences between the practice of mindfulness on a psychological and a spiritual level. Holzel et al. continue: ‘de-identification from some parts of mental content is often experienced even in the earliest stages of meditation practice. We suggest that although this stage is not yet the full dis-identification from a static and unchanging self-described above, it is a change in perspective about the sense of self and an alteration in first-person subjective experience. Changes can be summarized as a more positive self-representation, more self-esteem, and higher acceptance of oneself’.

They regard these four components and mechanisms as presumably highly interrelated, working synergistically and possibly interacting so closely with one another that a distinction between each component might seem artificial. However, interestingly they say that the different components might come into play to varying degrees within any specific moment during mindfulness meditation and differentiating between these components seems useful in order to guide future basic research, and to specifically target areas of development in the treatment of psychological disorders.

Holzel et al. posit these four elements alongside each other. Although they stress, rightly we think, their interrelatedness, one could argue that these elements are pretty heterogeneous and of a different level. 'A specific way of paying attention', according to the definition of Kabat-Zinn [3] 'non-judgmentally and purposefully in the present moment' is clearly the basis for any development of mindfulness. Body awareness, emotion regulation and change in perspective on the self, seem to us in the first place results, accompanying developments: gaining more balance and openness to inner and outer reality, which enhance the process.

About (*self*) *compassion* Holzel et al. mention, apart from what they describe as the main components of mindfulness, that 'meditation is typically practiced with an intention—implicit or explicit—to cultivate *self-compassion*, as well as *compassion* toward other beings. Different types of meditation practices vary in the degree to which they foster its increase. Some types of practices are pursued even with the primary goal of cultivating (self-) compassion, while others strongly emphasize self-compassion within the context of traditional mindfulness meditation. In mindfulness-based stress reduction, even though it is not the declared primary goal of the program, self-compassion is implicitly and explicitly interwoven into meditation instructions'. Within the framework of mechanisms they propose, they suggest that self-compassion is presumably most related to emotion regulation as well as to the change in perspective on the self and add that 'there is small empirical basis for the explanation of the mechanisms of self-compassion, and data on neural correlates are lacking, and it is possible that unique aspects of self-compassion are not addressed within the suggested components'. On the level of *brain-processes*, evidence suggests that mindfulness practice is associated with neuro-plastic changes in the anterior cingulate cortex, insula, temporo-parietal junction, fronto-limbic network, and default mode network structures.

Shapiro et al., 2006, [21] posit, building on Well's Self-Regulatory Executive Function model [31] and Teasdale's Differential Activation

Hypothesis model [32], another type of model of three basic components (axioms) of mindfulness: intention, attention and attitude, which they deduced from Kabat-Zinn's definition. They call them the essential building blocks, however this should by no means be interpreted statically or 'materially'; they see them, just as Holzel et al. as dynamic components, interwoven in a single cyclic process, simultaneously occurring. They mention the aspect of *intention*, as 'an aspect that got lost to some extent in the attempt to extract the essence of mindfulness practice from its original religious / -cultural values...'. Intention, a personal vision can be evolving and an earlier study indicated that outcome correlated with intentions. [30] We can agree with their conclusion that 'the inclusion of intention (i.e., why one is practicing) as a central component of mindfulness is crucial to understanding the process as a whole, and often overlooked in other contemporary definitions. They cite Kabat-Zinn [3] 'Your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you...of why you are practicing in the first place. I used to think that meditation-practice was so powerful...that as long as you did it at all you would see growth and change. But time has taught me that some kind of personal vision is also necessary'.

Regarding the second fundamental aspect '*attention*', Shapiro et al. mention concentration, inhibition and the ability to shift focus as aspects that are also of interest in contemporary cognitive psychology. However, they also point to a phenomenological way of attending, what Husserl, a founder of the phenomenological approach in philosophy, refers to as 'return to the things themselves', suspending all the ways of interpreting, which is characteristic of mindfulness.

Regarding the third aspect '*attitude*', they write, that it pertains to 'how we attend'. It concerns the quality of attention and they distinguish between a kind of cold, critical quality and a kind of affectionate, compassionate quality; speaking of the latter they stress the importance of including such 'heart' qualities in mindfulness, an attitude which should be intentionally trained.

In their theory, Shapiro et al. suggest that these three axioms lead to re-perceiving reality, a shift in perspective they see as akin to the concepts of de-automation, de-centering and detachment. This re-perceiving resembles also a natural developmental process, for instance taking the perspective of the other, but through mindfulness this shift of perspective continues and accelerates. From this process they postulate that additional mechanisms are fostered and in turn contribute to the positive outcomes produced by mindfulness practice. They highlight four of them: self-regulation and self-management; emotional, cognitive and behavioral flexibility; values clarification; and exposure.

Inherent in all of these mechanisms are the three axioms: intention, attention and attitude.

We can agree with their view on the importance of the aspects and quality of intention and attitude, and their ideas about the ‘heart’ qualities [9] possibly corresponding with Holzel’s speculations about the possibility of ‘certain unique aspects of self-compassion’, and of the phenomenological way of paying attention, all of which seem to be of crucial importance in the process of mindfulness.

Some Implications for Research

Trying to draw some conclusions from the preceding discussion it seems obvious that researching the process of mindfulness is far from easy. First of all, research is confronted with a problem of definition. We saw that producing an exact definition of mindfulness and meditation practice turns out to be impossible for various reasons. For example there are cultural reasons but it also seems inherently impossible to define and objectify the essence of the deepest existential human experiences. These phenomena, for instance happiness, beauty, love, have an essence that can be understood by (almost) everyone, but can only be defined and researched by their observable aspects, which are many and of different quality. For instance there are different ways in which one can feel happy. This, unfortunately, undermines the reliability and validity, and therefore the relevance, of research focusing on the essence of the concept. Moreover, they are intra-psychic observations and they interact, sometimes very fleetingly, with their context. Research in psychology is essentially different from research in the natural sciences and in these aspects much more difficult. All atoms of oxygen are alike in the whole universe; all different bones in the human body are very similar all over the earth. In natural sciences standardization, often required by Western science, can be attained almost perfectly.

Components of a mindfulness practice can have a beneficial or harmful effect depending on how they interact with other characteristics, especially the ego-strength of patients. Our experience in giving mindfulness training showed that people benefit from various exercises very differently, and in a mostly unpredictable way, casting doubt if research on separate components, without taking these interaction-effects into account, would be productive.

We agree with Shapiro et al., that intention, attitude and a specific phenomenological quality of attention are essential in the process of becoming

more mindful. We have noticed, just as reported in the extensive literature about the application of mindfulness in relation to psychosis that patients with a history of psychotic episodes can benefit from the training when they meet criteria such as being sufficiently stable and having a strong intention to attend the training. These criteria only partly relate to symptoms of psychoses. It seems that, for a subgroup of these patients, mindfulness training, could improve their quality of life, perhaps even preventing them from having a new psychotic episode; nevertheless it seems improbable that randomized controlled trials (RCT's) could cast much light on this question.

Research could possibly be more productive if it was focused on the interaction of variables, such as the interaction between intention, diagnostic category and the effect of mindfulness training, than towards determining which (part of a certain) treatment works best in relation to a certain general diagnostic category.

A related issue is the problem of control groups, which are essential in applying RCT's. If intention is so crucial, as Kabat-Zinn and Shapiro mentioned, it is no wonder that people will profit more if they have a strong intention before they begin the training. Intention increases effectiveness because patients will probably be more motivated and practice better. In our view, there is a parallel to research in the field of psychotherapy. Regarding the treatment of depression for example: there will be subgroup of patients who are of nature more receptive towards what they believe as a 'no-nonsense' type of therapy and philosophy, and who are not willing to participate in a paradoxically working mindfulness-training and on the other hand there will be patients who are by nature inclined to benefit from experiential forms of psychotherapy or a mindfulness training.

MINDFULNESS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Does Mindfulness Relate to Psychotherapy?

All psychotherapists in all schools of psychotherapy try to help their clients and patients to confront (parts of) reality, try to help them experience it, and support them when necessary. In other words, they try to give them a compassionate mirror and space to express themselves and gain insights in order to grow emotionally or behave more effectively. Compassion is probably the most profound type of support one can give in psychotherapy, and also in

life in general. It is not the same as empathy or sympathy. In fact compassion encompasses a type of empathy and sympathy that transcends the personal aspect. It is a sympathy based on an understanding of human vulnerability and deficiency, in which one knows oneself is equally human but does not identify with the other.

As to the 'mirror' function of the therapist, this takes a different form in every type of therapy, according to the school. In psycho-analysis the therapist wants to make patients aware of their resistance and defense-mechanisms. In cognitive behavior therapy the therapist tries to show them their irrational ways of thinking and patterns of avoiding. In the experiential humanistic therapies the focus is often on experiences of the bodily felt meanings. [9,33,34] In Eye Movement De-sensitization and Reprocessing therapy (EMDR) the clients re-experience their traumatic impressions. [35] However, in all these therapies there is an element of watching and experiencing what is happening inside one, helping one to look in one's mirror enabling one to respond to reality in a better way. This requires a response of the whole person. In cognitive therapy for instance it is not only believing new rational thoughts but also mindfully and experientially confide in them; in humanistic therapies, where a mindful attitude to one's experiences in the therapy itself is a central feature, it has to be related to the experiencing of new behavior. Thus, we regard psychotherapy as a profession in which a degree of mindfulness is applied without labeling it as such. Educating patients about the philosophy of mindfulness and applying mindfulness meditation practice in an explicit and structured way as a part of the psychotherapy has been described as being potentially very useful for patients with various disorders, for instance anorexia nervosa. [36].

Mindfulness, stopping and watching, can be regarded in yet two other ways as the naturally accompanying attitude of the psychotherapist. Therapists pause, so to speak, their personal life and tune in on the actions and reactions of the client, by watching them and also watching their own reactions towards them., These counter-transferential reactions, as they are known in psycho-analytical terminology, are experienced 'in one's mirror', without acting upon them.

As to the function and symbol of 'space', this is profoundly illustrated by the concept of 'containing'. First used by the psycho-analyst Bion, it has become a generally accepted way of looking at the relationship between psychotherapist and patient and between a caring parent and a child, especially a young child. Patients (like a child growing up) need a mentally and emotionally safe space in relation to the therapist (like the caring parent) to

express their unbalanced impulses, thoughts and feelings. They cannot yet contain them in themselves in a balanced way; they need another person, to whom they feel related, to 'accept them'. This other person must have the inner balance to let it happen while remaining in an open contact, even if approached negatively or aggressively, and not attach to them in a personal way, not identifying with his own reactions and acting them out. It is perhaps best described as 'being in relation' in a pure way. This illustrates how difficult maintaining a state of mindfulness can be. It is not a black and white affair and starts with patiently enduring; precisely what one tries to teach.

One can take a further step and choose to willfully train to achieve mindfulness as an *attitude in life* and not restrict its use to spontaneously expressing it mentally in pondering about a question or in the context of a professional role as a therapist, or in a natural position as a caring parent.

Some Illustrations

Mindfulness *training* can result, on a psychological level, in 'simple' but significant changes as well as in profound psycho-dynamic processes when hidden emotional conflicts come into light. It fosters processes of change and growth but in a quite different way than in psychotherapy. In psychotherapy there is a dialogue through which the process is directed, interpreted and given form. In mindfulness there is no dialogue, it generates a spontaneous openness, creating room for change and a potential for self-healing in a way that cannot be predicted. [37]

The process can be relatively simple. For example, a fifty year old man, while practicing mindfulness, becomes aware of a lot of annoyance in oneself. Understanding the philosophy of mindfulness he manages not to automatically obey the habitual impulse of acting out and trying to escape from that uncomfortable feeling. This insight, in combination with skillful meditation, creates the possibility of distancing himself and adopting a more neutral or even friendly attitude toward this feeling of his. He learns to just let it be, thereby becoming the master of this impulse and coping more quietly and effectively with the source of the annoyance, becoming more agreeable for others.

Another kind of experience concerned a forty-five year old woman. She reports: This weekend I was reminded to the mindfulness training. I was on a train with my husband to spend a night in Amsterdam. I have been busy lately and was a bit stressed. But, one way or the other, the train-voyage quieted me.

I read the newspaper, thought about nothing else except what I was reading, looked outside the window and thought about what I saw. And what I saw was a lot, it happens more often that I am aware of the beauty of things. Also this time. The sky was so extraordinary beautiful. And I felt so grateful that I was allowed to see it. I had to think about the training, because it enabled me to stand still in the moment. I thought: my depressions are caused perhaps because thoughts and impressions can bombard me so strongly. However: that has thus a positive side too. It is so nice to consider it in this way. I pondered about the word 'mindfulness. It seems really so that your mind can be full of all kind of things – you think about this and that, often not nice things – but your mind can be also full of what you presently see. That was what happened in the train. It was so beautiful!

A profound process started when a forty year old woman, while practicing in a mindfulness training, became aware of an overwhelming resistance against practicing. It caused her to stop for a while. However, she slowly realized that she was been confronted with a returning pattern in her life: whenever starting something significant she faced a deep anxiety about the possibility of succeeding. This insight worked out as a motivating force to start practicing again, resulting in an almost overwhelming feeling of nausea. Being aware just enough, she was able for the first time in her life to experience this resistance as a phenomenon, 'a happening in the space of herself', instead of 'herself'. There was a release from this deeply rooted pattern of defense and she came into contact with its energy in a way that she could now use more constructively instead of being overtaken by it.

The occurrence of such a psycho-dynamic experience of great significance during a mindfulness training requires a very supportive atmosphere and a trainer, who has professional knowledge of psychodynamics and is able to guide this process, not in a regular psycho-therapeutic way, but, if possible, with the means of mindfulness meditation and philosophy, perhaps explaining the type of process and helping the trainee to trust it. Further psychotherapy, including mindfulness-practice was very beneficial for her integration.

Concerning Ego Strength and Risks

Mindfulness practice requires a sufficient amount of energy and concentration to be able to direct one's attention. In a state of severe depression or psychosis, or if one is under the influence of drugs, practice evidently is impossible. There are many forms of meditations, including

sitting, lying, walking, singing, and dancing. Some make use of visualizing, some focus on concentrating, and others have no specific object of attention. They can all be valuable but the form chosen should be dependent on the context as they all can have different effects and consequences. Although mindfulness is meant to foster a non-judgmental attitude, in very subtle ways judgments are induced or can be experienced in a training, especially when 'progress' becomes a goal in itself. [38] The paradox of attaining mindfulness is that 'experiencing no progresses or 'feeling resistance' is perfectly fine. They are no more than just expressions of momentary thoughts, feelings or bodily sensations, ever changing in the course of life. The only purpose is becoming aware of them without acting upon them. Pleasant or unpleasant is not relevant here and a genuine, non-judgmental gentleness towards their appearance, and, according to Edel Maex, transforming the pain into compassion, is essential in practicing.

Edel Maex [38] elaborates also about possible dangers. Pressing, forcing, going across one's limits—not to be confused with exploring one's limits—is always counterproductive. Yet, in training one may feel pressure from oneself, from other group members, or even from the trainer himself to 'perform better' or strain oneself more. This can be accompanied by an idealization of an incorrect concept of mindfulness, of the trainer or of the training group, which can lead to unrealistic expectations. This could be very harmful with respect to the understanding of mindfulness itself and to one's sense of self-worth, strengthening a feeling of deficiency. In every way psychopathological personality aspects can interfere with mindfulness practice. A trainer should have relevant knowledge and experience to cope with it.

It is of the greatest importance that one can withstand the effects of meditations, (i.e., have enough ego-strength to stay aware and, if necessary, stop in time so as not to be overwhelmed). If one has been traumatized, meditations can result in a re-experiencing of the traumatic event, which can be potentially very harmful if ego-strength is too weak or adequate support is absent. Having a vulnerable ego is in itself not a contra-indication for meditations. This pertains especially to patients with a borderline personality structure and patients who have suffered from a psychosis. Meditations with a concrete and relatively outward focus, or a supportive image to be visualized, can function in an ego-strengthening way. They foster concentration and focus, strengthen body-awareness and so are helpful for resisting the tendencies to get lost in thoughts and feelings of stress, anxiety and helplessness. In applying mindfulness there is an overall philosophy of gentleness towards one's experiences whatever they are: there is never

anything wrong, no result is required, and one can always make a fresh start. This has deep healing potential. On the contrary, meditations without a stable and concrete focus, lacking a clear structure, can cause a patient to be overwhelmed by anxieties. This can make focusing on one's breath or body too difficult. Overwhelming regressive effects on a vulnerable personality can also be triggered by practicing in a lying position with the eyes closed. For a trainer working with vulnerable people, sufficient psychological and psychiatric knowledge is a must. In a spiritual context, for instance in retreats, this kind of professional knowledge is often absent. Therefore, in that context there can be a risk.

Mindfulness in an Intimate Relationship

Relationships based on mutual attraction, especially when started without one knowing oneself very well, will almost always go through periods of emotional difficulties. Hans Knibbe [39,40] elaborates on this field in relation to mindfulness. Almost unavoidably, especially in the western culture where individuality and autonomy are promoted, one projects one's expectations, needs to fulfill, ideals, and pain (in short everything one has missed emotionally during one's upbringing as a child) on his or her partner. At the expense, consciously or unconsciously, of being sincere, one often uses adaptive strategies to prevent losing the other in order to avoid the pain of loss or the fear of being alone. The other, then, is more or less an object of one's wishes and expectations. One can grow emotionally if one succeeds in managing this pain and gains insight into this process of projections and unreal expectations. This requires an awareness of one's own expectations and emotions and an awareness of the otherness of the partner; the insight that he or she has the right to be his or her own 'self', and one's mindful ability to simply let one's painful reactions be, giving inner space to them, experiencing them without acting on them. Without identifying or attaching, one must learn to see oneself as the source of one's desires and disappointments instead of trying to escape from these feelings and blaming the other. Then it can become and be felt as a qualitative development, a transformation, in oneself instead of a deprivation. In this way mindfulness creates the space *to be* in a relationship instead of *to have* a relationship and to have the other.

This pattern of wanting and grasping will, nevertheless, always be with us; however, Knibbe writes, we can gradually learn to relax in it. This requires determination and persistence. A quantitative approach would be to strengthen

self respect or build up one's sense of self esteem by learning social skills or learning to be more assertive, and thereby expanding one's potential. This, of course, is very useful and may even be necessary. Mindfulness, however, goes to the root of the pain, confronting oneself with it. The feeling of incompleteness then can transform into a deeper felt sense of completeness; one becomes in touch with a deeper, more solid ground in oneself, where the need to be fulfilled by the other person and the feeling of being poor and inferior dissolves. In this bodily felt awareness of one's pain and being wounded, of one's incompleteness and imperfection, healing occurs; there is reconciliation and coming to peace with oneself exactly the way one is.

Mindfulness thus opens not only the door to a deeper felt ground in oneself but also in the relationship with the other. It transcends the duality of desire and disturbance, different from the conditioned way of coping with the fear of loss. A process of such depth requires sufficient stability in one's personality to cope with the, sometimes intense, pain and fear and one must have the conviction that this is worth the trouble, which means deeply valuing the processes. [39,40]

MINDFULNESS IN A SPIRITUAL CONTEXT

In Buddhist tradition, and in other traditions, mindfulness served in a psychological as well as in a spiritual way to promote wellbeing and development. We will now address how the psychological and spiritual orientation is related from a viewpoint of mindfulness and what the main distinctions would be.

We will mention first again the essential characteristics of mindfulness.

We characterized it as the following sequence: 'stopping', and 'watching', becoming aware of what is happening as if in a mirror, in an impartial, non-judgmental way, without attaching oneself to what is being watched. Or in another image, 'experiencing the body as a space', transparent for one's breath, merely observing what goes on (i.e., thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations) without attaching to any of it. Not attaching means keeping a slight inner distance from the events happening and by doing so one creates the space for a freedom of choice. This is a freedom to choose how to relate to what one is conscious of instead of being conditioned to stimuli and one's automatic reactions to them. We stressed that awareness is something which one 'adds'; there is never any intention to actively change or destroy one's experience. In this state one is aware of the phenomena one is conscious of.

This two-sided relationship is crucial. And by taking, in being aware, the position of a slight but significant distance to the phenomena at present, which is not to be confused with a pathological form of dissociation, one connects with a center in oneself of another quality. This may be better expressed as ‘a center in oneself shows itself and can be felt’.

Let us now look at how these principles work on a spiritual level.

A Spiritual Process in Buddhism and Christianity

At first glance, when addressing to mindfulness practiced in relation to a spiritual orientation in the Buddhist context, there does not seem to be a striking difference with what we have already described in relation to the psychological orientation. One practices meditation. The only but significant difference seems to be that it is, from the beginning, a radically different chosen way of life and not a gradual development of skills and a new attitude in the context of ordinary life. In terms of the building blocks in the theory of Shapiro [21]: there is a different intention and attitude.

What seem to be distinguishing features between the psychological way and the spiritual way? From a spiritual point of view, it starts with the faith that the reality of the psychological dimension, the way in which we all naturally live our daily life, is relative and imbedded in another dimension. The psychological dimension is analogous to clouds obscuring the perspective on the sun. Thus, although the meditation practice is fundamentally the same, the inner context and the purpose of the practice are essentially different. In the psychological domain mindfulness remains instrumental for one’s well-being, one’s ‘I’, one’s personality, which can grow in authenticity throughout this process. One remains identified with one’s primary identifications, (one’s name, one’s family, and maybe one’s profession) while becoming more free and peaceful in relation to one’s life and less identified with reactions to all kinds of pain and stress. Despite the paradox of mindfulness, ‘forget’ the desire for well-being, just practice, then the fruit will come of itself’, it is highly unlikely, hardly possible, that this desire disappears and that one aims to be dis-identified from this aspect of one’s ‘I’.

When practicing in the context of a spiritual orientation it is precisely this desire, to dis-identify, experientially and not just mentally, from all desires and all conceptual thinking and thus also from the concept of ‘I’, that is the core issue. Not-attaching to the natural, conditioned, way of reacting means here ‘without aiming for any specific result, paradoxically aiming to become

radically dis-identified from any aim. It is based on Buddha's theory that the 'I', too, is a temporary phenomenon. That doesn't mean that there aren't any relatively stable aspects in the personality. In essence, however, everything, including our identities and their accompanying thoughts and feelings, is continually in a process of changing and ultimately dying. Therefore dis-identifying from even our deepest identities can be seen as a logical and ultimate consequence of mindfulness and this view on reality.

In the psychological 'use of mindfulness' this perspective will be, of course, very frightening, as it feels as losing one's ground. In the spiritual perspective, detaching oneself even from this ground is accompanied with the faith, which is supported by the reported experiences of those who did this before, that one will find a new ground. This occurs only spontaneously at an unpredictable moment but when it does occur it is a trans-formative experience, completely changing one's view on ordinary life. One enters another dimension of consciousness in which all 'otherness' and distinctions disappear as it is often reported. One experiences becoming one with the transcendent, the cosmos or whatever name one gives within the symbolic context of one's tradition, experiencing ultimate peace and the ultimate view on how reality really is. In Buddhism this is called nirvana, enlightenment, or connecting with 'the Buddha mind, the real ground'.

In Christian spirituality, especially with monks, comparable processes are described using the Christian symbolism and terminology. Here one starts with a strong desire, accompanied with faith, 'to seek God'. There is often a moment of a sort of wake-up call, a turning point, to begin this quest which is a rather radical choice. A way of mindfulness is generally called a way of contemplation or contemplative prayer. It is a form of meditation and mindfulness on Christ and Christian texts and symbols. [11] Parallel to the Buddhist path, it fosters a process of 'becoming empty' of one's natural identities, which leads, just as in Buddhism, to this other dimension of consciousness in which all 'otherness' and distinctions disappear, which in Christian terminology and symbolism is called 'God'.

It goes beyond the purpose of this article to discuss in more detail significant differences between these two spiritual ways. What we primarily want to show is a corresponding process in both traditions in which mindfulness has a very prominent place. The study of texts, rituals, and praying all prepare the ground for this process of transformation. Instructions and theological distinctions allow one to distinguish these universal experiences from the subjective imagination of the personality of ordinary life. Also common in both is a desire to connect with a dimension 'higher or

deeper' than the visible dimension of ordinary life, and in doing so to transcend the natural 'ego-centric' state. The new state of consciousness in which one arrives is felt as one's 'true' nature.

These experiences are commonly called 'mystic'. William James [41] described four characteristics of mystic experiences. First, it is transient and temporary. Second, it is ineffable in that it cannot be adequately put into words. Third, it is noetic as the individual feels that he or she has learned something valuable from the experience and gained knowledge that is normally hidden from human understanding. Fourth, it is passive, for when it happens it is largely without conscious control. It is not something that can be turned on and off at will. The real aim however is not these transient experiences themselves but the stable state of detachment from the world and one's natural inclinations. In a mystic experience the subject-object distinction and the meaning of ordinary time and space disappears when abiding in Buddha mind or in God. In Christian terminology, God is experienced in oneself and one experiences oneself in God. While these are felt to be the same, one is not God himself. It is a paradoxical experience, characteristic of this dimension of consciousness. These mystic experiences or entering into this qualitative different state of experiencing can be regarded as reflecting the ultimate consequence of being mindful. Of course, in the area of spiritual as well as in the area of psychological development of mindfulness one can observe all possible 'degrees' of being more mindful or contemplative. On a spiritual path there is a most interesting paradox that one's personality must have a strong determination to move to a conscious and freely chosen 'surrender' of itself. A sacrifice of one's 'I' as one's center. The spiritual meaning of this 'surrendering', which has to do with humility, should not be confused with the psychological meaning of a generally humiliating submissive surrendering out of fear or physical force. The latter results in loss of freedom, while the former is reported to be a totally different, even opposite, phenomenon, related to love, resulting in a sense of freedom and mastery greater than ever could be experienced in ordinary life.

In both traditions, Buddhist and Christian, one leaves one's natural identity and personality behind. It does not mean losing or destroying one's personality either; it means 'not attaching to it anymore'. The ordinary world continues to exist and demand a personality. But one's personal characteristics are ultimately experienced as one's instrumental being, and no longer one's real 'I'. One could conclude on logical grounds that very vulnerable or weak personalities should be discouraged from such a radical practice, because for them the loss of ordinary security implies a great risk.

About these processes and about mystic experiences is frequently reported. The specific details always reflect the culture and personality of the receiver of these impressions, for one's physical body and one's psychological-cultural structure remain the vehicles. The inherent problem of descriptions of mystic experiences is that they require words and concepts, while they are happening outside the 'world of concepts' and therefore there is a lack of common concepts and images. They can only be expressed in the language of symbols or in an evocative, poetic, non-descriptive way. In ordinary life such expressions correspond with the way poets, and other artists, also try to express experiences that go beyond descriptive concepts.

Soul

Let us now turn to the Christian concept of the soul and how this relates to what has been said up till now about mindfulness. From a religious point of view, man is partly earthly, partly divine. In general the earthly dimension, which corresponds with evolution, biological survival and historical processes, dominates over the divine. In Christianity the soul is a mediator, making it possible for man to participate in both the earthly and the divine.

Interestingly, the word 'psyche' in Greek meant soul as well as butterfly. This can be seen as the soul's similarity with the transformation from, as well as the mediating relationship of, a very earthly entity, the caterpillar, to an entity that is hardly attached to anything, dancing in the sky.

Of interest for our purpose, which is to explore the correspondences and the distinctions between the psychological and the spiritual dimension from the angle of mindfulness, is the striking similarity between descriptive images of the soul and a mindful state. The images of 'a mirror in oneself' and 'an empty space in which all experiences exist, coming and going, without one attaching to them' are traditional symbols for describing the soul. One finds these symbols in Buddhism too, as well as in other spiritual traditions. In a spiritual context, in contrast to a psychological one, this development can result in a state of consciousness in which one experiences *being oneself as this mirror* or as this space and not an active watcher any more. In this state there is no sense of activity anymore.

A mirror is in itself empty from earthly impressions and yet in touch with them, a space containing everything, yet not influenced by anything. The pure soul is often symbolically described as an unstained mirror or a purely open space, a state of pure awareness, not being attached to any experienced

phenomenon. As we mentioned previously, a state of mindfulness, also in the psychological area, could be described by these symbols.

The process of 'opening for the soul' can be described in terms of meditation becoming contemplation. Meditation practice starts by establishing a stable attention, the necessary ability to concentrate. One has to use one's natural will for to do this. After that one can make one's attention wider, expanding, to cover a larger space. It can even be made so wide that it contains the total field of experience at succeeding moments: the totality of living experience, a stream of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Widening the scope one can experience that one becomes this space oneself, receiving all the experiences in it. A receiving, detached, attitude becomes dominant. In this space the soul will appear as the center and the ordinary 'I' and the will, which normally lead, recede. Mediation, which is relatively active, has become contemplation, which is mainly passive and receiving.

Breathing

In the meaning of breath and breathing we find another aspect of mindfulness where the psychological, the spiritual and also the biological dimension seem to be related. In a biological sense breath obviously is life giving. Although one cannot speak of breath in the simplest forms of life, there is always an exchange and interaction, a way of relating of a living entity with its environment. On the psychological level in man there is an intimate relationship between the breath and emotional and mental states. Breathing relates immediately to a change of the inner state, when one is startled, overwhelmed by sadness, or hears good news. Being aware and receptive of one's breathing generally brings oneself an experience of being opened in oneself.

In the tradition of the practice of mindfulness and contemplation, paying attention to one's breathing has always been considered as extremely important. The Greek word 'psyche', the Latin 'spiritus', the Sanskrit 'atman', the Hebrew 'ruach', and the Sanskrit 'prana' all relate to 'breathing' and are at the same time keywords referring to concepts such as soul and spirit.

Psychology Interacting with Spirituality

A few words about the interaction of psychological and spiritual aspects in ordinary life, they can interweave and interfere in many ways. Even on a high level of spiritual development, one's habits and needs remain present. One's spiritual drive can be strongly colored by unconscious psychological 'survival' drives, resulting in all kinds of serious psychological and spiritual deformations, often caused by projections of one's psychological needs. For example, an image of God is, in the beginning of a spiritual orientation at least partially a projection of the image of a parent or an idealization of it. A spiritual notion can easily exist within a life without being involved on a spiritual path and mindfulness practice can easily function in a useful way to reduce stress and gain peace and freedom without one wanting to give up one's deepest identifications. And, on the other hand, one's personality and body undergo often a change during authentic spiritual experiences.

DISCUSSION

Apart from intending to give a broad description of mindfulness practice and theory and its relation to a psychological and a spiritual level of practicing, we attempt to answer two questions:

- Could the practice and function of mindfulness be viewed as a way to attain a kind of inner freedom, which can be considered as an important step in the development of mankind and his evolution?
- Could it be of significance for modern psychology that mindfulness was developed in a culture where the universe and human existence in it was considered to be an integrated organic whole, differentiated into material-biological, psychological-mental, and spiritual-ethical aspects, each of these aspects subject to their own laws?

Regarding man's biological and psychological evolution, we made a distinction between a 'natural' way of living that could be characterized as for the most part automatic and conditioned and living in a mindful way. We tried to show how the main characteristics of mindfulness, 'not being attached' and

‘being compassionate’, lead logically to an increase of inner freedom. This is not a freedom from the actual inner or outer circumstances themselves, but a freedom in relating to them and a freedom from the automatic nature of one’s conditioned behavior, oriented towards avoidance of pain and seeking of satisfaction. Freedom in relating to one’s circumstances makes one more ‘a master of one’s mind’. If freedom of choice exists for man, it is difficult to see how it can exist outside a mindful state, because one needs to be detached, at least partially, from the pressing conditioned reactions. If a state of mindfulness is a qualitative step in the development of mankind, we have to acknowledge that mindfulness has already been at man’s disposal for thousands of years. This suggests strongly that it is apparently very difficult or unsatisfying to acquire and practice it in a systematic way.

Mindfulness was developed in cultures where the universe and human existence in it were considered to be an integrated organic whole. In modern, especially Western, scientific thinking and contemporary psychology, that is generally said to have started at the end of the 19th century, we find another view. Not surprisingly modern scientific psychology had, from the beginning, to deal with the problem of establishing scientific objectivity in subjective experiences. During her relatively short history, scientific beliefs and criteria have changed dramatically. There has been a period when researchers relied more on subjective reports and a phenomenological approach and periods, especially within the last decades, wherein psychological research was dominated by a desire for strict objectivity.

In our view, especially the science of psychology, in comparison to other sciences, is confronted with the task to find a balance between these two aspects. To rely solely on subjective reports seriously undermines a scientific standard. Yet relying solely on objective methods, adopted from the natural sciences has another drawback, amongst others because these methods necessarily require clearly and narrowly defined concepts. This fits the material world very well, but creates a serious, probably insurmountable, problem in humanities and social sciences. Here it undermines the validity and relevance of research. We discussed the functioning of the two hemispheres of the brain. The objective methods, working excellently in the natural sciences, and by their nature focusing on parts, seem strongly related to the left hemisphere. In the humanities, however, the essential organic wholeness, implicit in existential phenomena, easily gets disregarded by these methods. We regard mindfulness as an example of such an existential phenomenon.

The conviction of a profound interrelation of phenomena has gradually, over the centuries, been abandoned in modern science. In exploring the

essence and practice of mindfulness we described several significant interrelations and correspondences on a material, psychological, ethical and spiritual level. It suggests that it may be valuable and useful to take such an organic approach into account again.

We fully acknowledge what a challenge this would be for contemporary psychology and for research in psychology and we hope that mindfulness in this respect will eventually function as a gift.

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