

Mindfulness: A Way of Cultivating Deep Respect for Emotions

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Editor's note: We welcome Belinda Siew Luan Khong back to the *Hakomi Forum*. She, like those in Hakomi, has been fostering the clinical use of mindfulness and Buddhist concepts for many years. In this paper, first presented at the American Psychological Association Convention (San Diego, 2010), she shares how mindfulness can bring an open, respectful, non-attached way of relating to emotions that she illustrates with a PTSD case study. Her presentation was first published in the journal *Mindfulness* (Vol. 2(1), pp. 27-32) and is used with the kind permission of Springer Science and Business Media.

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ABSTRACT

The practice of mindfulness affords individuals a way of cultivating deep respect for, rather than avoiding, emotions. Cultivating a deep respect for emotions means appreciating and honoring what is unfolding moment by moment. When one nourishes a deep respect for whatever emotion arises, then one greets it as an honored guest with an important message to deliver, rather than an enemy to contend with. In embracing and befriending whatever arises, mindfulness makes it possible for the individual to savor and get in touch with more refined emotions. A case study—Katy's experience with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is discussed to demonstrate how mindfulness enables her to develop deep respect for the range of emotions she experienced as a result of her trauma, and to make space for them. Specific mindfulness practices and other complementary psychological approaches adapted to her concerns were put in place to help her to "override" her body memory (an important feature of PTSD) of the experience. The processes involved in the mindfulness practice enabled Katy to get in touch with her motivations for her actions and her more refined emotions of compassion and sense of responsibility. Incorporating mindfulness in her treatment plan helped Katy to cope with PTSD more effectively and also made it possible for her to acquire a life skill that went beyond learning to cope with the trauma.

Key words: mindfulness, emotions, post-traumatic stress disorder, deep respect, honored guest.

Introduction

Emotions are complex. As noted by Ekman (2008), “emotions unite and divide the worlds in which we live, both personal and global, motivating the best and worst of our actions” (p. xii). Emotions not only divide our worlds, we ourselves have a propensity to divide emotions—into positive and negative ones. Our habitual tendency is to avoid negative emotions, wishing them to go away, and attach ourselves to positive ones, hoping that they will linger longer. Generally, psychology is geared towards helping people to understand and cope with emotions, especially negative ones. Mindfulness grounded on Buddhist concepts and practices aims to help people to tolerate and accept all emotions, positive and negative. In addition to understanding, coping with, tolerating and accepting our emotions, we need to cultivate a more refined and gracious way of relating to them—one that allows us to befriend and embrace all our emotions, and to appreciate the impact and meaningfulness of our emotions in their entirety. As therapists, we could facilitate our clients with this process by not only helping them to understand and accept their emotions, but to cultivate a deep respect for them.

Current research and anecdotal evidence on mindfulness-based treatments have shown that mindfulness has been effective in helping individuals reduce the impact of negative emotions across a range of anxiety-provoking situations. However, mindfulness can play a larger role than just assisting individuals to cope with negative emotions. Generally the practice of mindfulness is perceived as a skilful way of developing a greater tolerance for and acceptance of difficult thoughts, negative states of mind, feelings, and emotions, by letting them be, and learning to let them go.

Today, the use of mindfulness with mental health and health issues has become well known and familiar through a range of mindfulness-based approaches such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1996); mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal, William & Teasdale, 2002); acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes & Smith, 2005), and dialectical behavior therapy (Dimeff & Linehan, 2001). Mindfulness practice has also gained worldwide acceptance and recognition through the works of many prominent researchers including Davidson et al. (2003) and Siegel (2007, 2009a), and the research that has emerged from the ongoing dialogue between his Holiness, the Dalai Lama and neuroscientists organized by the Mind and Life Institute. Numerous studies relating to mindfulness have been published, attesting to the efficacy of using mindfulness in the area of mental health (Khong & Mruk, 2009).

Understanding Mindfulness

What is mindfulness? Kabat-Zinn (2005) described mindfulness “as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally and as open-heartedly as possible” (p. 108). Mindfulness is a way of being, rather than doing (Khong, 2009). The aim of mindfulness is to become continually aware of, and to label our thoughts, feelings, and emotions objectively, and to accept them for what they are without needing to change or justify them (Gunaratana, 1991). In this sense, mindfulness is emotion friendly, as being mindful makes it possible for individuals to get in touch with a range of emotions and feelings in a non-confrontational, neutral manner (Khong, 2004) and to learn to respond to them authentically and whole heartedly.

Although for the most part, Western psychology tends to relate to the mind, brain, and body (and heart) as discrete entities, this is not the case in most Asian philosophies and cultures. In fact, the Chinese character for mindfulness incorporates the words heart and mind with the word now so mindfulness means to be present now with one’s heart (body)-mind, the heart-mind being perceived as one integrated whole. The understanding that mindfulness entails heartfulness is important to the way we deal with emotions.

If we relate to emotions primarily with the mind, there is a tendency to think about emotions and to appraise them cognitively (“I think that I am angry”) and this could trigger a lot of internal dialogue, often unrelated to the felt sense of anger itself (“I don’t have friends”). On the other hand, if we relate to emotions with the heart-mind, and are aware when we sense anger arising in us (“I am feeling angry”), we could learn to just be present with this felt sense (e.g., pulse racing, tightening of the stomach) without automatically triggering off ruminative thinking about anger. The ability to be mindful of and to befriend the bodily sensations associated with emotions is an important initial step in learning to cultivate deep respect for emotions.

Being mindful involves maintaining meta-awareness of what we are experiencing in the body (heart)-mind moment-by-moment. This sense of meta-awareness itself is neutral, that is, it is not infected with what is being experienced (e.g., the awareness of anxiety itself is not anxious). Mindfulness assists individuals to become aware of, and reduces the tendency to get involved in the story of what happened or might happen to me, and just experiencing what is actually happening in me. In short, mindfulness

enables individuals to cultivate a neutral, objective, and open attitude towards their present reality, instead of infusing this reality with a lot of emotive content and discursive thinking.

Cultivating a Deep Respect for Emotions

According to the *Collins Dictionary* (Gilmour et al., 1995) respect for one's feelings means adopting "an attitude of deference or esteem," "appreciation, honor," and "pay[ing] proper attention or consideration to" the feelings (p. 822). Cultivating deep respect for emotions involves learning to pay attention to, embracing and respecting what unfolds, so that we are able to discover hidden qualities and meanings in these emotions, giving rise to greater opportunities for self-reflection and self-knowledge. An analogy for this way of relating to emotions is the experience of diving into a lake or sea. Although not apparent to the naked eye from the surface, if we get down into the water below where it is calm and still, we might encounter a complex subterranean life that is full of richness, beauty, and promise, or fraught with danger.

The kind of attitude that we can adopt towards our emotions is captured well in the poem, *The Guest House* by Rumi (1994), an eighteenth century Persian poet and Sufi mystic. According to Rumi, each day, like a guesthouse, human beings are confronted with new arrivals—"a joy, depression, meanness." (p. 41). He recommends that we welcome each arrival as an honored guest "the dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing and invite them in" so that we can remain open to the subtle message that each guest might be bringing. In relation to emotions, the analogy of the gracious host and honored guest illustrates two important points. The first is that, like uninvited visitors, emotions occasionally come upon us unexpectedly and unsolicited—so trying to control our emotions, especially negative ones, from arising is usually futile and stressful. It would be analogous to trying to control the waves from running over the sand. The second point is that instead of trying to control our emotions, a change in our attitude and response to these unsolicited guests can make a difference. By cultivating deep respect for our emotions, we can learn to welcome each emotion as it arises as an honored guest with an important message to deliver, rather than an enemy with which to contend.

The concept of savoring (Frijia & Sundararajan, 2007) provides a good theoretical framework for, and points to the role of mindfulness in cultivating this attitude of deep respect. According to Frijia and Sundararajan, the term "savoring" a Chinese concept, emphasizes "the self-reflex-

ive awareness in which the intentional object of emotion is the experience rather than the experienced object" (p. 229). Briefly, the idea of savoring involves the experience of dwelling on the flavor, making fine discriminations of, and appreciating the felt meaningfulness of each flavor. An example would be the difference between eating and tasting the food.

Savoring one's emotions helps individuals to develop "experientially engaged detachment," that is "detachment born of contemplation" (Frijia & Sundararajan, 2007, p. 231) enabling individuals to get in touch with more refined emotions. According to the authors, in this way, savoring can assist in transforming coarse emotions into more refined ones. Coarse emotions are characterized by "distinct bodily upset, overt behavior manifestations ...relatively simple event-emotion relationships," (p. 227) while refined emotions are described as emotions that are more felt, but often do not manifest themselves in overt behaviors, and could be imbued with meanings beyond the immediate implications of the occurring event. For example, the aims of coarse emotions tend to focus on simple outcomes such as avoid, attack, or flee. In refined emotions, there is a multiplicity or greater specification of aims so that one is able to expand one's appraisal, to experience meanings to the full, forestall impulsive responding, exercise restraint or take responsive actions (Frijia & Sundararajan, 2007). In my view, coarse and refined emotions are not superior or inferior relative to each other. However, refined emotions are generally more subtle and less easily accessible, unless we learn to be mindful of them.

To acquire this stance of deep appreciation and engaged detachment, we need to quieten our minds and tolerate being with the emotion fully in order to grasp its wider meanings. In this regard, honoring, savoring, and mindfulness have complementary roles to play in cultivating deep respect for emotions. Honoring encourages us to welcome the emotions, savoring invites us to engage with them in a meaningful way, and mindfulness provides us with the practice, self-discipline, and skills for doing so.

Case Study

The practical applications of the concepts and practices discussed in the previous sections can be illustrated with the case study of Katy involving her experience with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This case study demonstrates how various mindfulness practices along with complementary psychological approaches adapted to Katy's concerns helped her to manage and overcome PTSD.

Katy, aged 24, a maternity nurse at a postnatal ward of a Sydney hospital, was finishing her evening rounds, checking on the mothers and babies and ensuring that visitors had left the ward. One of the patients, Fatimah, had given birth a few days earlier, and was being discharged the next day. She was a young mother who was the victim of domestic violence from her boyfriend, Ali, the father of the baby. The Department of Children Services had recommended that Fatimah and the baby live with the grandmother after their discharge.

Ali, a young man of Middle-Eastern descent, was visiting that evening and had refused to leave when visiting hours ended. Katy noticed Fatimah walking out with Ali. Suddenly, the baby's grandmother ran in shouting "He is going to take the baby." Katy realized that the couple were planning to take the baby from the hospital. She also observed that Fatimah appeared to be a reluctant participant in the situation.

Intuitively, Katy rushed out and tried to position herself between Fatimah and Ali, and advised them that they could not take the baby out of the hospital. Ali grabbed Katy and tried to push her away. A security guard rushed in to intervene, shouting, "He's got a gun!!" Ali pointed the gun at Katy and Fatimah. Fatimah was very frightened, and allowed Katy to take her and her baby back to the ward. Ali ran off. The police were called and the hospital went into a lockdown while they hunted for Ali, who was finally caught, and later jailed. Over the next few days Katy became increasingly anxious and agitated and was unable to return to work in the ward. She was given short-term medical leave.

When she returned to work, she described herself as being on "speed dial," constantly scrutinizing her environment and being hypervigilant. During one of her shifts, a man of Mediterranean origin, who angrily demanded attention for his wife, confronted her. Katy was unable to cope with this confrontation and broke down. She said that the second incident brought back flashbacks of the previous one. Thereafter she became increasingly panicky, and couldn't sleep or leave the house. Katy was diagnosed with PTSD and was given long-term medical leave.

When she was first referred to me for therapy, Katy was highly anxious, and was unable to discuss the incident without crying. Although normally a quietly spoken person, she was experiencing a lot of anger at Ali's behavior. She explained that since the incident, she was fearful of going to supermarkets and public places, and loud voices set off her fears of possible confrontations. Encountering men

of Middle-Eastern appearance caused her to be hypervigilant and highly agitated. She experienced frequent panic attacks and flashbacks, and avoided entering the hospital grounds. Her dreams were punctuated with memories of the incidents, and she worried whether she could marry her fiancée and lead a normal family life. She also showed reduced interest in activities she used to enjoy. The trauma was clearly impacting all aspects of her being and her life.

Katy appeared to be experiencing many of the symptoms of PTSD such as recurrent and distressing recollections of the event, persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, a numbing of general responsiveness, persistent symptoms of increased arousal, and hypervigilance (DSM-IV, Kaplan & Sadock, 1998, p. 619).

Initially, our therapy work followed a crisis treatment approach including supportive counselling, cognitive-behavior therapy, engaging ongoing support from her partner and family, stress management and relaxation techniques, and psycho-education to help her to understand her experiences. Katy employed meditation and mindfulness practices to help her to calm down and to break the circuit before the negative thoughts and feelings of anxiety became too distressing. A plan of graded exposure was also put into place including systematic desensitization and exposure to similar natal settings in other hospitals. She was encouraged to visit the ward where the incident took place for short periods, gradually extending the duration of these visits.

Katy found the strategies that were put in place helpful, and was able to manage her symptoms better on a day-to-day basis. However she was still experiencing significant residual symptoms of PTSD. In therapy, these residual symptoms clearly showed in her body when we discussed the incident. I observed that her body would shudder and tremble when she recalled being held at gunpoint and acting as a shield. She would become increasingly agitated and unable to control her crying. At such times, Katy avoided getting in touch with her bodily sensations as she found this experience too distressing. Her internal dialogue highlighted her sense of helplessness and an overwhelming desire to leave the situation, even though she realized that there was no longer any present danger. She appeared to be unable to integrate the way her mind processed her feelings with the way her body responded to the emotions. It became increasingly clear that Katy needed to overcome her body memory and her felt sense of her experiences. We agreed on an approach that would help her to integrate her experiences holistically using mindfulness.

During the mindfulness-based exercise, Katy learned to focus on her breath sensation each time she was aware of any emotions, feelings, or thoughts coming up. By using the breath as an anchor and an object of focus in her meditation, Katy was able to reduce her rumination, and to tolerate and accept her feelings and emotions of anxiety, fear, and hypervigilance.

Once she felt more grounded and relaxed, Katy was encouraged to talk about the incident again. At the beginning of the exercise, Katy was asked to select a piece of music from a meditation CD. She chose an instrumental piece with the sound of running water. Katy explained that she liked the idea of water cleansing her body of negative emotions, feelings, and thoughts. During the exercise, Katy focused on her breath each time she became aware of her bodily sensations, especially her instinct to flee. This time when she spoke about being held at gunpoint, we had the music with running water playing in the background continuously. I suggested that she let her body and mind be present with the sound of water, rather than the sound of her words. During the session, Katy used mindfulness to get in touch with her body sensations, bringing her focus back to her breath, and allowing the music to “wash” over her body each time she experienced any negative affect. In this way, Katy was able to talk about the gunpoint episode without her usual negative somatic reactions. She explained that the mindfulness practice and the music made her feel somewhat “cleansed.”

Another difficulty that Katy was encountering was the agitation she continued to feel from the realization that she could have been killed by acting as a shield for the mother and baby, and she was distressed by what she perceived to be her naiveté. During the meditation exercise, when Katy was feeling calmer, I encouraged her to visualize, using as a focus, an analogous meditation image that could help her to understand and appreciate the type of person that she is, in responding so courageously. The idea here was to encourage Katy, through mindfulness, to cultivate a deep respect for the emotions associated with her action, by practising what Frija and Sundararajan (2007) described as “experientially engaged detachment.” It was hoped that through this practice she would be able to get in touch with the more subtle implications of her action and transform the coarser emotions of agitation and distress into more refined ones.

For this part of the exercise, Katy selected from Kabat-Zinn’s guided mindfulness meditation practice CDs, a meditation practice using the image of a mountain as an object of focus. As Katy meditated, visualizing herself as a

mountain, grounded and centered, and not easily buffeted by external factors, she gained the insight that her act of shielding Fatimah and the baby was motivated by compassion and a sense of responsibility for their welfare, and that she was responding spontaneously to what the situation required of her as a nurse. Katy also realized that had she failed to act to protect the mother and the baby, she would have felt guilty about failing in her duty.

By learning to savor and honor her negative emotions rather than avoiding them, Katy developed a different relationship to her action and feelings. Instead of chastising herself for her naiveté, and being in “the wrong place at the wrong time,” she was now able to acknowledge her action as an expression of her authentic nature as a compassionate, responsible person. These insights had a remarkable impact on Katy. As she put it, “It helped me to understand that I took responsibility because she was my patient. It is just me. Part of my nature and it is okay.”

Katy continued to gain significant insights from using mindfulness to deal with other aspects of the incident. For example, instead of feeling anxious and hypervigilant whenever she encountered people of Middle-Eastern descent, Katy realized that Ali’s nationality was incidental to the custody issue concerning the baby, and that his ethnicity, although an understandable trigger for her anxiety, should not color her perspective of all Middle-Eastern people. The insight provided her with the ability to refine her emotions and feelings, and to differentiate between Middle-Eastern people in general and the offender.

Katy explained, “I still react when encountering people of Middle-Eastern descent, but not as severely. Previously I would move aside if I saw people like that. Not anymore. I realized that there are a lot of people of that origin, and I have to differentiate individuals not based on their race, but what they do.” Her ability to manage her feelings of hypervigilance even got her to the point where she was able to offer to act as photographer for a Middle-Eastern family sight-seeing near her home.

Discussion

According to Phillips (2007), while the biological flight or fight response is natural and instinctual, when this response is blocked, as happens in trauma, the organism constricts. Phillips noted that if the constriction from the trauma continues, rage, terror and helplessness could build up “triggering immobility and inward collapse” and “also emotional numbing, and other forms of psychological disassociation” (p. 13). This description appears to parallel what was happening with Katy. Phillips recommended

the practice of “somatic experiencing” (p. 12) that briefly involves helping the client to get in touch with the body felt sense of the trauma and integrating the emotional and biological symptoms to resolve the trauma somatically and psychologically.

The practice of mindfulness is well suited to the process of mind-body healing, especially in relation to trauma. The mindfulness and meditation practice gave Katy the internal calmness to self-regulate her emotions cognitively and somatically. Additionally, the meta-awareness of her emotions gave her the space to observe her emotions from a detached observer's stance. Although she was aware of a sense of anxiety and terror, she was not overwhelmed by these emotions. The juxtaposition of the sound of running water over her biological flight response helped her to override the body sensations and her negative body memory of the trauma. By remaining still, yet mindful, Katy was able to accept and tolerate the emotional “guests” that pervaded her being during her recall of the incident. The stillness and awareness sustained through her mindfulness practice enabled her to listen quietly and to remain open to the message that these guests were bringing—that her body needed to accept and integrate what her mind had endured with the trauma, and to draw on her own internal resources to heal from within.

Katy's ability to integrate her mind and bodily responses to her experiences is consistent with Siegel's explanation of how mindfulness practice is helpful with this kind of integration. According to Siegel (2007, 2009b), the human cortex comprises six layers. Layers one-three, referred to as “top-down” (2009b, p. 153) are responsible for the matching of current experience with prior learning. Layers six-four, which he termed “bottom-up” (p. 153) are responsible for the awareness of sensory input from our experiences. He gives the example of listening to clapping noises. The identification of the word “clap” comes from the top-down layers which are influenced by prior learning, and often constrains our ability to be with the present experience because of our past association with the word clapping. Siegel explained, however, that when you are just aware of the sound of the clapping, it is a bottom-up experience as it is related to the sound, rather than the labeling of the noise as a clap. According to Siegel, mindfulness practice attempts to dissolve the top-down constraints (layers one–three), and strengthens the input from the bottom layers (layers six–four), allowing awareness to be shaped by the flow of information merged from the two layers. As noted by Siegel, “when this bottom-up input is strengthened, it has the capacity to stand up to prior learning that

so often constrains us. We are not imprisoned by our prior judgments and come to experience the world with fresh eyes” (p. 154).

Katy's ability to integrate her experiences and to acknowledge that her acting as a shield was motivated by her sense of responsibility, enabled her to come to terms with her actions and see them with fresh eyes. His Holiness, The Dalai Lama (2008) emphasized the importance of understanding the motivations that drives our emotions. Accordingly to the Dalai Lama, “...without considering the ... motivational level, you cannot judge right or wrong purely on the basis of physical or emotional actions” (p. 74). The Dalai Lama goes on to explain that (p. 144):

When you have an intense emotion of compassion, an intense state of compassion for someone, there is disequilibrium. There is a sense of affliction. But the difference here is that in the case of afflictive [negative] mental states, there is an element of loss of self-control, loss of freedom. Whereas, in the case of compassion, there is no loss of freedom. ...The affliction that is experienced by the person who is having compassion is in some sense not out of control because he or she chooses to be in that state. Voluntary. Because of this, although on the surface there might be a sense of anxiety in that compassionate person's mind, deep down there is a strength.

The explanation by the Dalai Lama suggests that despite some negative physiological affects, emotions that are inspired by positive motivation can have a positive psychological impact on the individual. This elucidation can help to account for why Katy's insights into her own nature proved to be so liberating and therapeutic, and contributed significantly to her recovery. In being mindful of her inner strength brought forth by her visualizing herself as a mountain, Katy was able to get in touch with and appreciate the positive emotions that motivated her behavior. Even though the initial consequences of her action were traumatic, getting in touch with these finer qualities and motivations helped her to understand herself and her trauma in a way that no intellectual understanding or cognitive reframing would have provided.

Meditation and the practice of mindfulness have afforded Katy a quiet place to rest her mind while her body came to terms with the trauma. These practices have also given her the skills and capacity to accept and tolerate her negative emotions while honoring what she had to come to terms with—her body memory of the experience—and to learn to heal from within. And finally, with the self-awareness and reflection cultivated through being mindful, she was

able to get in touch with that part of her caring nature that moved her to put her own life on the line without hesitation. In my view, while a more standard treatment plan for PTSD may have helped Katy in the longer term to deal with the trauma, incorporating mindfulness into her treatment approach had given her a life skill and a way of being that went beyond just learning to cope and manage the trauma. In adopting a more refined and respectful way of dealing with her emotions through mindfulness, Katy's self-image, beliefs, and her way of coping have been transformed significantly. She feels empowered and has gained a greater sense of self-confidence and self-reliance in her ability to manage negative situations, feelings, emotions, and life in general:

I don't get images of the incident anymore. My anxiety is not paralyzing. I don't try and control life and my feelings as much. I just accept my anxiety will come up from time to time, and I just learn to manage feelings as I am experiencing them. I don't intend to change my life because of the incident. The trauma is not in the forefront of my mind. It doesn't define who I am. I don't see myself as a victim.

After overcoming her PTSD, Katy married her fiancée and is now the mother of a healthy baby boy. In acknowledging the major role that mindfulness played and continues to play in her life, Katy was happy to share her story. When I asked her for permission to discuss her experiences, she was forthcoming and said that "mindfulness has helped me to cope with PTSD and with life. I hope that it will help others as well."

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