Spirituality in Clinical Practice

Demystifying Buddhist Mindfulness: Foundational Buddhist Knowledge for Mindfulness-Based Interventions

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Today, much of the field of psychology has accepted mindfulness as a choice of intervention, and most practitioners and researchers have applauded its effectiveness in mental health practices. However, there are emerging criticisms from spiritually-sensitive clinicians on this application of mindfulness; they argue that the current practice of western mindfulness has employed a reductionistic approach, extracting the mindfulness component from Buddhism and modifying it in a secular way for clients. A number of scholars have recommended that practitioners and researchers acquire a foundation in Buddhist teachings and an understanding of the Buddhist rationale for mindfulness to effectively and ethically incorporate mindfulness as a treatment component. In response to that recommendation, this article aims to explain the Buddhist assumptions, rationales, and practices of mindfulness from a psychological perspective. In particular, it uses original Buddhist scriptures, the actual practices of Buddhist monks, and real-life examples to explain the construct of Buddhist mindfulness in order to increase understanding of Buddhist mindfulness among mental health professionals.

Keywords: Buddhism, meditation, mindfulness, mindfulness-based interventions

In the current trend of professional psychology, Buddhist-derived interventions (BDIs), especially mindfulness-based interventions, have received a significant amount of clinical and research attention in the past decade. Many of these BDIs, which have shown high efficacy in clinical studies, incorporate mindfulness interventions as an important component (Simiola, Neilson, Thompson, & Cook, 2015). Their successes have made mindfulness a mainstream treatment component in most contemporary interventions and provided a secular and effective intervention for individuals regardless of their religious affiliations. Although mindfulness-based psychotherapies are empirically supported as effective treatment programs for an array of psychological symptoms, some scholars in Buddhism and psychology have concerns of employing them in Western psychology:

1. Westernized models of mindfulness have tended to utilize a reductionist approach that divorces mindfulness from the spiritual paradigm of Buddhism, which may undermine the essence of Buddhist teachings (McWilliams, 2011). Some mental health professionals regarded this reductionist approach as a possible reduction in effectiveness (Huxter, 2007), a superficial calming technique which may not bring lasting changes (Neale, 2011), and a probable abandonment of the transformative potential in Buddhist mindfulness (Sun, 2014).

2. These psychotherapies may not incorporate the essence of Buddhist principles and theories, and this practice can have potential risks to clients who are using practices inappropriately (Neale, 2011; Shonin, Van Gordon, Slade, & Griffiths, 2013). First, applying mindfulness solely as a relaxation technique may lead the practitioners into dullness and hence hinder the
progress of meditation (Britton et al., 2014). Second, certain scholars pointed out the possible risks of practicing mindfulness without the guidance of ethics. Mindfulness practices can enhance the quality of awareness but it does not naturally result in compassion or morality (Sun, 2014). In other words, one can apply mindfulness in violence or criminal behaviors and the U.S. Marine Corps are utilizing mindfulness skills to optimize performance during combat (Watson, 2013). Third, most of the mindfulness research were conducted as quantitative studies which measured symptoms reduction related to short-term mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., Spinhoven, Huijbers, Ormel, & Speckens, 2017). Little is known about the experiences of long term-practitioners of Western mindfulness and the possible differences between them and the Buddhist mindfulness practitioners. Although there is not any empirical evidence demonstrating aversive effect of western mindfulness practices, the concerns for Western mindfulness has been increasingly voicing and hence it is important to understand such concerns of the Buddhist scholars to prevent potential risks.

3. A traditional Buddhist approach to psychological healing may promote more lasting positive changes (Neale, 2011), cultivate a different, keener, wiser kind of attention (Hyland, 2015), or provide more interventions that help mental health professionals to better address the needs of different clients (Lee et al., 2016). Consequently, a number of scholars have recommended that practitioners and researchers acquire a foundation in Buddhist teachings and an understanding of the Buddhist rationale for mindfulness to deliver effective BDIs to clients (Lee et al., 2016; McWilliams, 2011; Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2014; Sun, 2014).

In response to this recommendation, this article aims to explain the Buddhist assumptions, rationales, and practices of mindfulness from a psychological perspective. As mindfulness has become a generic term to describe a variety of mindfulness and meditation practices in Buddhism and other religions, this article specifically focuses on the Vipassanā meditation which is a central practice across Buddhist traditions.

A Brief Description of Western Mindfulness

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), was a pioneer in applying Buddhist mindfulness to the practice of professional psychology in the 1980s. Inspired by his work, a number of psychological interventions (e.g., Trauma-Focus Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) that incorporate mindfulness have been deemed empirically supported treatments according to the results of randomized clinical trials (Simiola et al., 2015). However, while definitions of mindfulness are actually different between professional psychology and early Buddhism, many individuals mistakenly equate these two terms (Farb, 2014).

Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) defined mindfulness as “being fully awake in our lives. It is about perceiving the exquisite vividness of each moment. We feel more alive. We also gain immediate access to our own powerful inner resources for insight, transformation, and healing” (p. 14). In MBSR, mindfulness is a nonjudgmental and present-focused awareness that involves acknowledging and accepting body and mind activities (Lo, Wong, Wong, Wong, & Yeung, 2016). It can also be described as paying attention in a purposeful and particular way in order for practitioners to develop moment-to-moment awareness of their experiences. During mindfulness practice, practitioners take an observing stance toward memories or past events, treating them as mental activities and letting them arise and dissipate. In most circumstances, practitioners are not required to remember or recollect any information in the past, to ponder or interpret mental activities, or to intentionally create mental experiences.

One reason for the development of Western mindfulness is the contemporary practitioners’ attempt to improve the traditional method and make the mindfulness practice more relevant to contemporary life. In fact, western Buddhists and western secular mindfulness practitioners have contributed significantly to the practice of mindfulness.
mindfulness in the last two decades. Another important contribution of western mindfulness is to allow practitioners to incorporate Buddhist teachings into regular social life without the pressure to achieve liberation. Mindfulness techniques can benefit daily functioning, interpersonal relationships, and other domains in life without any religious constraints. Moreover, the contemporary definition of mindfulness is valuable in demystifying this construct and presenting the gist of this practice in an easily comprehensible way. It also captures some of the essences of Buddhist mindfulness such as paying attention in a particular way and focusing on the present moment. This utilization of mindfulness can be effective in alleviating certain emotional suffering as mentioned before. Regardless of these benefits, the qualities cultivated by mindfulness are never the end goal; the mental qualities are only foundational building blocks to help Buddhist practitioners to advance according to the Buddhist teachings. If practitioners hold onto to the western mindfulness description of nonjudgmental awareness to note the mental activities, it may result in a state of mindless fixation and hinder the practitioners from reaching a higher level. Together with the concerns from different scholars, it is imperative to understand Buddhist mindfulness in the context of Buddhism to have a more comprehensive and thorough understanding of the true meaning of this practice.

Buddhist Mindfulness

The Western term mindfulness originates from the Pali term sati, which literally means “memory” or “recollection” (Sun, 2014). In the core teachings of Buddhism’s Noble Eightfold path, Right Mindfulness is an essential building block for “awakening” because it is a particular mode of recollection, or a special mental state, that allows practitioners to observe and know the true nature of causes, conditions, and effects (Karunadasa, 2014). In other words, Buddhist mindfulness refers to sharp observation skills over all mental processes, a strong acumen to discern skillful and unskillful qualities of mind, and a mental quality to elicit memory, which allows practitioners to vividly recollect the details of any experience (Buddhaghosa, 2003). The goal of Buddhist mindfulness is to train and refine the mind to build the foundation to practice the Buddhist teachings. Therefore, Buddhist mindfulness is a tool to support practitioners’ cultivation instead of an end goal.

To further understand the significance of mindfulness in Buddhism, it is necessary to examine the theoretical assumptions behind this construct. As there are different schools of Buddhism, the current discussion of Buddhist mindfulness is based on the earliest Buddhist teachings originated from the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma as an attempt to introduce the most original discourse from the Buddha (Murphy, 2016).

Rationale Behind Buddhist Mindfulness

According to the Buddhist paradigm, mindfulness is a crucial practice that liberates one from dukkha (suffering). Liberation from suffering is the key to Buddhist teachings, and all major concepts are related to understanding and ceasing dukkha (Buddhaghosa, 2003). In a general sense, to be liberated from suffering is to understand the laws of all things (Dhamma) and recognize a totally different form of consciousness which results in a nongrasping view toward phenomenon in the world (Kalupahana, 1987). It is a transformation into a state of experience in which all suffering and origins of suffering are extinguished.

According to the First Noble Truth, dukkha arises from attachment to a construct called the five aggregates, a collected unit that arises and falls together, moment after moment, to create the illusion of a “self.” These five aggregates are a combination of all physical and mental energies that shape, nourish, and maintain the mental fabrications of awareness or consciousness, which is roughly equivalent to the mental representation or concept of “the mind” in cognitive psychology. The five aggregates include matter (a foundational element that constitutes all phenomena, including solidity, fluidity, heat, motion, and sensation). From them, when our internal organs interact with the external world, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings arise. These become perceptions (interpretations of the experiences), mental formations (intention and action), and consciousness (awareness of all objects through the senses). From a worldly, noncultivated person’s perspective, the mechanism of the five aggregates is equivalent to the existence of the self, which this person only
sees the world through the five aggregates and regard himself as an independent being with free will and continuity; from a Buddhist perspective, by contrast, the collected unit of the five aggregates is merely a product of different conditions without individuality, and our identification with these conditions gives rise to the delusion of self (Tsering, 2006). For example, when a worldly person bought a plant and the plant died, the worldly person would feel upset because “my plant” died; in contrast, when a cultivated person bought a plant and the plant died, the cultivated person would understand the dying of a plant as a nature process, see all intrapersonal cognitive and emotional reactions to the dying of the plant, and know how he personalizes a plant to “my plant” and fabricate the notion of self which result in suffering from grief and loss.

Because of the delusion of self, dukkha can be experienced in two senses: (a) Dukkha leads to felt suffering through unpleasant mental feelings such as the sadness, worries, or fear; (b) Dukkha also leads to reckoned suffering in which attachment to anything impermanent or anything related to the notion of self will eventually lead to suffering (Buddhaghosa, 2003). This is because all phenomena in life—including happiness, wealth, success, or relationships—are impermanent in nature and subject to change; hence, all types of clinging results in forms of suffering such as grief over loss and frustration over not getting what one wants.

To become liberated from suffering, one has to understand the notion of the self as a mental construction or a fabrication that is impermanent in nature (Tsering, 2006). Through mindfulness practices, one sees that this “self” is only something that has been created by falsely identifying with things in life as part of a self. For example, one may become attached to the body one has in this life and assert its continuity and permanence through plastic surgery while neglecting the fact that our body has a transient existence and that no one has full control over birth, ageing, illness, and death. Meanwhile, understanding impermanence and “not self” requires an experiential process with high levels of concentration as well as strong observation skills. The practice of Buddhist mindfulness is the pathway to cultivating these essential qualities for seeing, knowing, and accepting impermanence and not-self and, thereby, for approaching liberation. Under the Buddhist assumption, when one truly sees and knows the Four Noble Truths, how Dukkha arises and ceases, and how one holds onto changing conditions to claim them as a “self,” she or he will attain the experience of extinction (nibbāna), thereby ceasing all dukkha, attachment, kamma, or other worldly phenomenon. In other words, Buddhism’s systematic mindfulness practices were created to attain supreme knowledge of liberation from suffering (DN 22.1, as cited in Bodhi, 2011).

Some Western scholars (e.g., Britton et al., 2014) suggested that process of understanding and gaining insights into the constructed nature of the self may help practitioner gain detachment while this practice may also result in a state of unhealthy dissociation. It is crucial to make a distinction between the Buddhist concept of detachment and the psychological construct of dissociation. Dissociation is a disruptive state of consciousness which blocks out an array of emotions and external reality (Dorahy et al., 2017). It may include derealization, depersonalization, psychological numbing, disengagement, or amnesia that are common symptoms in trauma related psychological disorders such as dissociative identity disorder and post-traumatic stress disorders. In contrast, detachment in Buddhism refers to a state of equanimity related to the acknowledgment and understanding of reality (Tsering, 2006). With such understanding and acceptance of internal experiences and external reality, one would not give rise to strong emotional reaction. Therefore, the Buddhist detachment and psychological dissociation are qualitatively different experiences which may be understood as hiding emotions in comparison to dissolving emotions.

The Practice of Buddhist Mindfulness

The Buddha described the human mind as a monkey journeying around the forest being distracted by anything the monkey sees (Karunadasa, 2014). Mindfulness practice aims to tranquilize and recollect the mind, leading the practitioner to obtain the heightened awareness required to observe and notice all mental activities. In this way, we can learn to see things or phenomena as they really are without excessive interpretations or attachment. Mindfulness also implies seeing that all phenomena in life are impermanent (anicca), lead to suffering (dukkha), and are not-self (anatta). Satipaṭṭhāna
Sutta, one of the four most important Buddhist scriptures on mindfulness, captured the central ideas of such mindfulness practices as follows (Kuan, 2008):

With regard to the body dwells watching body; s/he is ardent, clearly comprehends, is possessed of mindfulness and overcomes both desire for and discontent with the world.

With regard to feelings dwells watching feeling: . . .

With regard to the mind dwells watching mind; . . .

With regard to dhammas dwells watching dhamma; s/he is ardent, clearly comprehends, is possessed of mindfulness and overcomes both desire for and discontent with the world.

(DN 22.1, as cited in Bodhi, 2011)

The word Satipatthāna is a combination of sati, which refers to a sense of remembering, and upatthāna, which means “standing near” or “guarding” (Tsering, 2006). Satipatthāna refers to the actual activity of observing or watching the body (bodily sensation), feelings (mental feelings), mind (cognitive processes), and dhammas (all phenomenon). This process of watching the mind requires the development of several mental qualities, including concentration, strong observational skills, discernment, and the ability to recollect. According to SN48, 10, the faculty of sati refers to the ability to be mindful and meticulous in remembering and recollecting things that were done and said (Bodhi, 2011). With a high level of concentration and alertness, one needs to keep remembering the in-breath each time one breathes in or out. To cultivate one’s quality of mind is to cultivate a keen observation of the activities of the body, feelings, mind, and dhammas in fine detail as well as to create a metacognitive understanding of how you observe these phenomena (Thanissaro, 2012). One also has to develop the ability to remember all these mental processes without fault and to have these memories readily available at any time. In the process of remembering, the practitioner pays attention to how past experiences arise and shape current experiences. With attention diverted to the act of remembering, one can see clearly how past experiences shape current consciousness, including current thoughts, psychological feelings, and behavioral responses to stimuli. When one gains awareness of internal mental processes through this remembering, one can avoid the automatic activation of responses and make mindful choices (Tsering, 2006). Similar to the previous discussion on the difference between dissociation and detachment, it is important to note that the mindful experience is different from suppressing, denying, or rejecting an experience. When being in a mindful state, the practitioner acknowledges and clearly examines the mental processes and understands how he or she relates to such processes instead of spontaneously reacting to stimuli. It is a mental space to analyze a moment-to-moment experience and to consciously respond.

Because of these specific theoretical assumptions, Buddhist mindfulness has a distinctive way of practice, one with the goal of helping practitioners to see and know impermanence and not-self and there are several criteria in common practices (Bodhi, 2011). First, according to the Satipatthāna Sutta, Sampajañña (clear comprehension/clear understanding) is a core quality cultivated in accordance with bare attention (Kuan, 2008). Clear comprehension means to experientially know and see how processes arise, become established, and subside in our bodies and minds (Bodhi, 2011). It also encompasses knowing the purpose of your practice, discerning between skillful and unskillful intention, choosing skillful means to advance your practice, and eventually seeing impermanence and not-self. For example, with clear comprehension, a practitioner knows and sees how paying attention to his stomach rather than his nostrils is effective in grounding his attention, so he chooses to focus on his stomach during his practice to cultivate his ability to focus. According to the Buddhist assumption, clear comprehension is an essential quality for understanding the dependent origination of feelings and contemplating impermanence in order to relinquish both desire and aversion (Tsering, 2006).

Second, one’s mindfulness practice has to be guided by an experienced Buddhist teacher who begins by introducing Buddhist concepts such as attachment, impermanence, and self (Tsering, 2006). As an example, at the beginning of satipaṭṭhāna practice, a teacher may ask the practitioner the following detailed questions about his or her breathing: What happens to your stomach when you breathe in? Does the chest expand when you breathe in? What happens to your stomach when you do not breathe in; does your stomach expand when you do not breathe
in? And what parts of your body are affected by breathing? (Nissanka, 1993). After processing the answers from the practitioner, the teacher will list the body parts—including the neck, stomach, hands, nostrils, lungs, ears, hand, shoulders, heart, eyes, and legs—to foster keen physical observation skills. The Buddhist teacher will repeat this practice and the questions until the practitioner successfully cultivates a deeper sense of awareness before proceeding to the next level. Moreover, the teacher usually assigns regular practices and provides immediate guidance to help the practitioner ensure accurate and appropriate practices. The form of practice assigned can be sitting meditation, walking meditation, or being mindful in any other moment during daily activities (Karunadasa, 2014). The goal of this practice is to shape the quality of mind so that it has a keen sense of awareness at any moment of life. When the practice continues to progress, the teacher will guide the practitioner to contemplate on feelings, mind activities, consciousness, clinging, and eventually the existence of self.

Further, Buddhist mindfulness is never a solitary practice of training the mind to pay attention in a particular way; instead, it is a part of a comprehensive practice that includes other efforts, such as learning Buddhist doctrines and following Buddhist ethics (Tsering, 2006). The goal of ethical living does not originate from the faith in the Buddha or observance of the Buddhist dogma. Instead, the goal of Buddhist ethics is to protect practitioners from negative karma and defilements to the mind. Living a moral life facilitates the practice of mindfulness because Buddhism assumes that good actions purify the state of mind while bad actions defile the mind (Karunadasa, 2014). Therefore, doing good deeds and following such precepts as not killing or stealing helps to increase compassion, loving-kindness, and composure of mind, thereby increasing the mind’s stability. The practice of Buddhist ethics is a self-driven and conscious decision of practitioners to monitor their intention and behaviors in order to facilitate their practice of Buddhist teachings.

Conclusion

There was an intriguing Buddhist story on mindfulness: after the Buddha died, there were many monastic communities continuing to practice the Buddha’s doctrines and one of their common practices was for monks to only take alms as their meals. In one monastic community, an elder monk led his fellows to walk to the village for almsgiving during meal time. The elder monk had practiced mindfulness so ardently that he was always fully aware of each step when he walked, was always mindful of his feelings and thoughts, and sustained high mental concentration along the way. Without distraction or wandering thoughts, the elder was patiently and silently walking on his route, leading his fellows. After the elder walked for a while, a fellow monk from the group suddenly yelled out to the elder monk: “Hey! Where are you going? The village is the other way!” It was a story to tell Buddhist practitioners that if you are mindfully and diligently moving forward without a clear direction, you could be lost and misleading others.

The popularity of mindfulness has reached a historical high point in professional psychology, appearing almost like a magic cure to a variety of presenting problems. Along with the increase in its popularity, the risk of improper practices has also increased dramatically because there is a lack of quality assurance governing the practice of mindfulness interventions and an insufficient understanding of the theoretical background of mindfulness practices. Understanding the Buddhist theoretical assumptions and actual practices of mindfulness can potentially increase the preparedness of practitioners, avoid harm to clients, and avert them from going into the “wrong way” by having an inaccurate understanding. Although a limitation of this article is its narrow scope in explaining Buddhist psychology and practices (for more arduous detail could be provided), I hope that it opens an invitation for mindfulness practitioners to learn the foundations of Buddhist teachings to inform both more ethical practices and more effective treatments.

References


Received January 22, 2017
Revision received May 25, 2017
Accepted May 30, 2017