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MINDFULNESS BASED STRESS REDUCTION

Introduction to MBSR, contemporary and traditional mindfulness, and an overview of new trends of integrating science and contemplative practice in the world and in Hungary

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*“Buddhism is not a religion,
It is the science of mind.”*

(His Holiness the Dalai Lama)

Foreword

This is not an academic paper but a brief overview of the field of contemporary mindfulness- and other contemplative practice based applications. The author is neither a scientist nor a scholar but a Zen practitioner and teacher of a few mindfulness applications. This article is rather a compilation or mosaic of different point of views than a presentation of a single (own) opinion. It attempts to provide a rough picture of the benefits, concerns, and trends related to this field.

“Mindfulness can only be understood from the inside out. It is not one more cognitive-behavioural technique to be deployed in a behaviour change paradigm, but a way of being and a way of seeing that has profound implications for understanding the nature of our own minds and bodies, and for living life as if it really mattered.”
(Kabat-Zinn 2003).

The potential role of mindfulness-based applications

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction came into being at the Stress Reduction Clinic within the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1979. The program was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist who practiced with various Buddhist teachers at that time. As he says;

“Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) was developed as one of a possibly infinite number of skillful means for bringing the dharma into mainstream settings.”

Nine years after establishing the Stress Reduction Clinic he wrote its bestseller book - Full Catastrophe Living - which includes the curriculum of the MBSR program.

“It captures the essence and spirit of the MBSR curriculum as it unfolds for our patients. At the same time, I wanted it to articulate the dharma that underlies the curriculum, but without ever using the word ‘Dharma’ or invoking Buddhist thought or authority, since for obvious reasons, we do not teach MBSR in that way.” (Kabat-Zinn, 2011)

Kabat-Zinn wanted the essence of dharma be accessible to common Americans facing stress, pain, and illness. It is also obvious and without doubt that the intention behind the

program was to help people to alleviate their suffering. On the other hand, he was cautious and wanted to avoid the risk that MBSR is being labelled as Buddhist, or ‘New Age’ or ‘Eastern Mysticism’. Meanwhile he was carefully avoided using Buddhist phrases he did not shy away from the Buddhist origins of mindfulness practice. He even asked Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the most renowned Buddhist scholar and teacher of these days to write a short endorsement for his book. In his endorsement Thich Nhat Hanh used the word ‘dharma’ four times and he compared the book to a ‘door’ between the ‘dharma’ and the world.

“This very readable and practical book will be helpful in many ways. I believe many people will profit from it. Reading it, you will see that meditation is something that deals with our daily life. The book can be described as a door opening both on the dharma (from the side of the world) and on the world (from the side of the dharma). When the dharma is really taking care of the problems of life, it is true dharma. And this is what I appreciate most about the book. I thank the author for having written it.” (Thich Nhat Hanh Plum Village, France, October 1989)

A door between the dharma and the world. Or a bridge connecting the land of contemplative practices and the land of science. These are the most common metaphors used for the description of the essence and role of mindfulness-based applications.

Brief introduction of MBSR

MBSR, like other mindfulness based interventions is based upon nonjudgmental awareness of moment-to-moment experience. Mindfulness exercises are aimed at intentional

moment-to-moment awareness of sensory, affective, cognitive, and attitudinal domains of perceptible experience, meanwhile fostering an attitude of kindness and openness to the immediate experience.

An average MBSR course usually takes place in a group format (cca. 5-20 participants/group), lasts for eight weeks, with 2.5-h long classes per week. Having finished the 6th class there is a 6-h weekend session. Each class includes specific exercises i.e., body scan, sitting meditation with various objects of attention, lying, sitting and standing yoga postures. Topics related to everyday life, stressful situations, and social interactions. The day long retreat retakes all exercises practiced and provides new ones. It is emphasized that regular daily practice is essential to the success of the program and as a support for home practice the participants are given homework assignments (approximately 30-40 min/day). Audio files of the practices and a printed workbook (or handouts) are also make part of the training package. Informal practice (that is bringing awareness to everyday life or mindfulness of routine activities) is an equally important part of the program as formal mindfulness practices. An overall goal of the MBSR program is that participants continue to live their life with greater awareness and enable them to respond to difficult, stressful situations mindfully rather than reacting to them automatically.

Because of its efficacy and popularity, MBSR became an inspiring model for numerous other mindfulness-based interventions (e.g. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy) not only in the field of health care and medicine, but also in other segments of the society, like education and the workplace.

Physical, psychological and other benefits of mindfulness meditation

Cultivation of mindfulness produces beneficial effects on well-being and improves psychiatric and stress-related symptoms. Mindfulness meditation has therefore increasingly been incorporated into psychotherapeutic interventions.

It is not the goal of this paper to give a detailed and accurate picture about the results of the countless scientific researches investigating the effects of MBSR and mindfulness meditation. This paragraph below (from Hölzel et al., 2011) is just an illustration of how diversified are these benefits.

Many research documents the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions in the treatment of various clinical disorders, including anxiety (Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010; Roemer, Orsillo, & Salters-Pedneault, 2008), depression (Hofmann et al., 2010; Teasdale et al., 2000), substance abuse (Bowen et al., 2006), eating disorders (Tapper et al., 2009), and chronic pain (Grossman, Tiefenthaler-Gilmer, Raysz, & Kesper, 2007). Furthermore, mindfulness meditation positively influences aspects of physical health, including improved immune function (Carlson, Speca, Faris, & Patel, 2007; Davidson et al., 2003), reduced blood pressure and cortisol levels (Carlson et al., 2007), and increased telomerase activity (Jacobs et al., 2010). Not only has mindfulness successfully been used in the treatment of disorders and improvement of health but it has also been shown to produce positive effects on psychological wellbeing in healthy participants (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009) and to enhance cognitive functioning (Jha,

Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; Ortner, Kilner, & Zelazo, 2007; Pagnoni & Cekic, 2007; Slagter et al., 2007).

According to Hölzel et al. (2011) mindfulness meditation exerts its effects through several components: (a) attention regulation, (b) body awareness, (c) emotion regulation (including reappraisal and exposure, extinction, and reconsolidation), and (d) change in perspective on the self. Recent empirical research, including practitioners' self-reports and experimental data, provides evidence supporting these mechanisms. Functional and structural neuroimaging studies have begun to explore the neuroscientific processes underlying these components. Evidence suggests that mindfulness practice is associated with neuroplastic changes in the anterior cingulate cortex, insula, temporo-parietal junction, fronto-limbic network, and default mode network structures. Hölzel and her colleagues suggest that these work synergistically, establishing a process of enhanced self-regulation.

The Mindfulness Movement

Contemporary mindfulness has become a rapidly expanding phenomenon. Today it manifests itself through innumerable (mostly) secular programs. Mindfulness-based programs are present not only in the domain of health care and general wellness, but also in education, in sports, in the justice system especially in correctional facilities, in the workplace, in leadership, etc... In recent years, there has been such an explosion of interest in mindfulness with widespread media coverage, bestselling books and a remarkable uptake of online resources that nowadays this phenomenon is often called as the mindfulness movement. In 2014 the Time Magazine even

reported about “The Mindful Revolution” on its cover page. In the western world, contemporary mindfulness entered the highest institutions of business (World Economic Forum in Davos, 2013, 2014...) and politics (UK Parliament, Mindful Nation Report, 2015), moreover, it is present even in the army (Mindfulness Based Mind Fitness Training, U.S. Defence). Contemporary mindfulness could penetrate into many areas of western societies what traditional Buddhism could never reach before in the West. Is it all good or some of the side-shoots of the mindfulness movement are not so desirable? Traditional Buddhist communities gave voice to their concerns about this phenomenon.

Traditional and contemporary mindfulness - roots, similarities and concerns

This section brings attention to the dialogue about the diverse perspectives on mindfulness both from traditional Buddhist and contemporary point of views. The Special Edition of Contemporary Buddhism (2011) was a remarkable work in this field (guest editors: J. Mark G. Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn). The thread of discussion started with the article “Traditional and Contemporary Mindfulness - Finding the Middle Path in the Tangle of Concerns” (Monteiro, Musten and Compson, 2014) was another source of this summary.

The roots of contemporary mindfulness go back to the rise of “Buddhist modernism” (Robert Scharf, 2013). According to Scharf, the contemporary understanding of mindfulness as “bare attention” and “present-centered awareness” arose from the Theravada revival in the early twentieth century, drawing its authority mainly from the Satipatthana-sutta. This system of meditation practice taught and popularized by

Mahasi Sayadaw, the Burmese meditation teacher, was an effort to teach laypersons the path of liberating insight without the need for skilled concentration or the experience of absorption (jhana). Originally, the conventional practice focused on the cessation of suffering, this new way of practice put more emphasis on mindfulness (sati), as moment-to-moment, non-judgemental awareness of the mind. This approach evolved into insight meditation in the West, which did not require the typical underpinnings of traditional Buddhism, such like the renunciation of lay life, familiarity with Buddhist psychological theory, etc.. Moreover, MBSR, the parent program of mindfulness-based interventions was influenced not only by insight meditation derived from Theravada teachings but also included concepts such as nonduality, bearing witness, and innate wisdom that are more traditionally associated with Mahayana schools (see also Cullen 2011). This combination of elements from different Buddhist traditions may be considered to be incompatible at the doctrinal level (Bodhi 2011). To make the picture even more complicated, contemporary mindfulness integrated the Buddhist originated contemplative practices with modern psycho-educational elements.

Both traditional and contemporary mindfulness share the intention of alleviating suffering in the world as it is now. They also share a common intention to transform faulty perceptions and mistaken ways of experiencing phenomena. Both are concerned with the welfare of the individual as well as stewardship of the global community. Although contemporary mindfulness retains the essence of traditional forms (meditative practices) and some essential parts of the traditional content (concepts of impermanence, emergent

self, transformation of negative mental states, and non-attachment), mindfulness-based applications are also based in Western psychological models (stress mechanism, cognitive therapy, experiential avoidance).

Traditional practice of mindfulness is associated with the Anapanasati and Satipatthana-Sutta (The Four Foundations of Mindfulness) Sutras. Cullen (2011) notes that the formal practices taught in MBSR are also based on the four foundations of mindfulness; however, it is likely that some MBI programs incorporate this teaching more explicitly than others.

At the same time, it is important to note that traditional practice of mindfulness is based on a ground of ethical foundations. Probably, it is the most important concern of the Buddhist community, namely, contemporary mindfulness does not include ethics *explicitly*, as part of the teachings. Jon Kabat-Zinn argued that ethics is *implicitly* included or inherent in the MBSR program, and as well, the ethical foundation of MBSR rests on personal and professional ethical guidelines (e.g. the Hippocratic oath). Another argument says that ethics is embodied in the person of the MBI teacher, since the prerequisites of the teacher training program include meditation practice and attendance at Buddhist retreats. Per Grossman (2015), the primary aim in teacher training is to cultivate an embodiment of the principles, including ethics.

Wallace (2008) and Olendzki (2008) have warned that contemporary understanding of mindfulness may be confusing for beginner practitioners. The stripped-down model of contemporary mindfulness (reducing mindfulness to attention in the absence of ethics) could result in the practice

becoming wrong mindfulness, which can have very negative outcomes (see Purser and Loy 2013; Ricard 2009; Senauke 2013; Titmuss 2013). The example of the sniper is often used to demonstrate how bare attention can lead to wrong mindfulness as the outcome of this type of attention has unwholesome results (i.e., killing someone and therefore violating a primary ethic to do no harm). As Matthieu Ricard simply put it in his keynote at the International Symposium of Contemplative Studies: “There can be a mindful sniper, but cannot be a caring sniper.” (San Diego, October, 2016) (Although this example becomes much more complicated if the sniper is a policeman or a soldier...)

Traditionally the practice of right mindfulness begins with developing an awareness of body, feelings, the nature of mind, and the constituents of mental experience (Analayo 2003; Gunaratana 2012; Silananda 2002). The practice of mindfulness in the latter two contemplations becomes the cultivation of discernment of mental experiences. When mindfulness becomes discernment between unwholesome and wholesome states of mind and a support of wholesome speech, thoughts, and action, the practitioner can be said to have cultivated right mindfulness.

Titmuss (2013) even expressed concerns that contemporary definition of mindfulness as a form of nonjudgmental awareness, could lead to passivity. This could therefore lead employees to tolerate oppression by their corporate employer.

There is an evident difference in the intention of practice as well. Traditionally the intention of practice is to transform our fundamental inclination from greed, anger, and delusion

to generosity, compassion, and wisdom. The intention of the practice in contemporary applications could be stress reduction or avoiding relapse or something similar.

Misunderstanding the intent could result in contemporary mindfulness becoming only a technique for symptomatic relief and losing its potential as the liberation from suffering. It needs to be mentioned that MBI programs go much further than their official names. They have the common intention to reduce mental dispersal (and stepping out of the autopilot mode), so that we have a direct contact with our unfolding experience. Ultimately, the practice leads to taking responsibility for our own experience and cultivating the wisdom to manage it skilfully. In the context of intention, the Buddhist Eightfold Path with the goal of liberation can be compared to a marathon (Compson and Monteiro, 2015). Of course, not everybody has the goal of wanting to run a marathon. Those who take an MBI program can be compared to those, who want (or able) to run only 5 km on the path. (They may want to run more later.)

Interestingly, Shapiro et al. (2012) report an increase in moral reasoning and ethical decision making at the 2-month follow-up of an MBSR program. It's not surprising, if we remember that the eight limbs of the Eightfold Path support one another, so training in mindfulness could lead to more ethical choices.

Barry Boyce (2015), Editor-in-Chief of Mindful magazine tried to summarize the concerns in the following way: "Ironically, two concerns surround the relationship between mindfulness and Buddhism: Some Buddhists are concerned that mindfulness ripped from its moorings in Buddhism is sham mindfulness; another group of critics is concerned about the opposite: that mindfulness—in a hospital or school, for

example—is stealth Buddhism...” He also added a short commentary about the meaning of mindfulness: “For most of its history, mindfulness was not a word in wide use... translator T.W. Rhys Davids decided to use it to render the Pali word *sati*, a Buddhist term for one of the key elements of meditation practice... Mindfulness today is no longer *only* the English translation of *sati*. It has also become a general term to describe qualities and virtues that arise from meditation, including compassion.” Of course, this reasoning is logical and understandable from the seat of the Editor-in-Chief of a magazine called ‘Mindful’. For a simple practitioner, it could seem, that there might be more than one meaning of the word ‘mindfulness’. It might have a different meaning from a traditional Buddhist, or a scientific, or a mainstream American point of view.

Finally, let’s see Jon Kabat-Zinn’s most recent argument from the April issue of Thrive Global magazine on the process of mainstreaming mindfulness. “It’s inevitable that some people might say, you’re decontextualizing mindfulness... if there were something lost in taking some element of meditative practice at the core of the Buddha’s original life and trying to bring it into the mainstream for anybody and everybody, the potential benefits far outweigh the costs. *MBSR is only eight weeks long and it’s meant to be a launching pad.*”

International trends

In October 2015, the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (MAAPG) of the Parliament of the United Kingdom published the UK Mindful Nation Report. The MAAPG was set up to review the scientific evidence and current best practice in mindfulness training, develop policy recommendations for

government. Based on the findings it provided a forum for discussion in Parliament for the role of mindfulness and its implementation in public policy. The report was prepared by MPs (members of Parliament) with the help of mindfulness experts after one year of preparatory work and 8 days of inquiry hearings of scientists and researchers in the Parliament.

The Mindful Nation report identified 4 areas where mindfulness-based applications could play a major role: (1) health care (2) education (3) workplace and (4) criminal justice system. In the field of health care in accordance with the guidelines of NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) MBCT should be available to more adults who will be at risk of recurrent depression. In the field of education and the workplace more research is needed to identify and disseminate best practice. The report urges government departments to encourage mindfulness programmes and research projects on these areas. In 2015 the Oxford Mindfulness Centre started a research project examining the effectiveness of a mindfulness training intervention for students (“.b” - Mindfulness in Schools Programme) with the funding of Wellcome Trust. More than 70 schools and more than 5000 students are going to participate in this 5+2 years research project. In the field of criminal justice MBCT should be available to offenders with risk of recurrent depression. (MBSR is already available in all the 8 high security prisons in the UK.)

Contemporary mindfulness is already incorporated into the formal higher education system in the U.K. and the U.S. The University of Oxford, the University of Bangor, the University of Exeter and the University of Aberdeen offers Masters

programmes in mindfulness in the U.K., meanwhile in the U.S. the Lesley University in Massachusetts offers a Master of Arts Program in mindfulness.

While mindfulness centres of universities may play a crucial role in research and training teachers of evidence-based mindfulness applications, institutions of contemplative sciences could play an important catalyst role in this field. The world-famous Mind and Life Institute was a pioneer in bringing scientists and contemplatives together. Mind and Life was established 30 years ago by the neuroscientist and philosopher Francisco Varela, the businessman Adam Engle and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Mind and Life Institute is committed to integrate science with contemplative practice. Presently Mind and Life focuses on the following activities: (1) Dialogues with H.H. the Dalai Lama (2) Summer Research Institute (3) International Symposium of Contemplative Sciences (4) Think Tank meetings (5) Call to Care - social and emotional learning in education (6) Academy for Contemplative and Ethical Leadership. There is a considerable overlap between the areas identified by the UK Mindful Nation Report (where mindfulness could play a major role) and the field of activities of the Mind and Life Institute.

In October 2016 Mind and Life organized the International Symposium of Contemplative Studies in San Diego. The Symposium of Contemplative Studies seeks to encourage and shape an interdisciplinary field in which science, education, the arts, and contemplative traditions collaboratively develop an integrated way of knowing. In the opening keynote the renowned neuroscientist, Richard Davidson talked with Matthieu Ricard, once a molecular biologist at the Pasteur Institute who became a Tibetan monk, and now he is a

bestseller author of several books. Matthieu Ricard noted that we have already seen a mindfulness revolution, now we are seeing a compassion revolution (referring to the numerous emerging compassion-based methods) and hopefully we will see an altruist revolution (referring to his last book on altruism). The last part of his statement was (partly) a gentle joke, but he emphasized the importance of compassion-based methods with a personal example. When he was a young monk, he asked the Dalai Lama for advice how to practice. His Holiness the Dalai Lama answered: “In the beginning practice compassion, in the middle practice compassion, in the end practice compassion.” We can hardly over-emphasize the importance of practicing compassion. The first contemplative practice based programmes were mindfulness-based programmes which taught mainly awareness techniques complemented with a bit of practice in loving kindness. Awareness is important but it is not enough. We still need to develop the heartfelt aspects of our minds.

An interesting phenomenon in this field which addresses this need is the new wave of compassion-based programmes developed in cooperation of scientists and contemplative scholars, as for example the Compassion Cultivation Training at Harvard University (Dr. Geshe Thupten Jinpa, McGonigal et al) or the Cognitively Based Compassion Training at Emory University (Dr. Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi) that is based on Tibetan contemplative methods.

It is also worth to mention that there are a few MBI programs which incorporate an explicit teaching of ethics or precepts: (a) the Spiritual Selfschema Therapy incorporates the Eightfold Path (Avants and Margolin, 2004), (b) MiCBT (Cayoun 2011) includes a module of ethical challenges in the seventh

week of its 12-week program, (c) The M4 Program (Monteiro and Musten 2013; Monteiro et al. 2010) includes five ethical practices derived from Buddhist lay precepts as part of the weekly homework.

Innovative ways of bringing the Dharma and Science together in Hungary

This section of this paper will provide an overview of the state of the mindfulness movement in Hungary. Present efforts focus on how it is possible to address the following typical difficulties that teachers and practitioners of contemporary mindfulness must face.

(1) After finishing a mindfulness course participants are left alone with their meditation practice usually without a community or sangha of practitioners. According to Cullen (2011), contemporary mindfulness need to find a way to address the question of how to cultivate and support a lifelong practice and a community (sangha).

(2) Since contemporary mindfulness-based applications are only 8-10 weeks long and they are specified to reach certain goals the participants are taught limited curriculum and only few selected practices and usually they don't have access to more complex traditional teachings.

(3) Institutions of science and contemplative traditions are still very much separated.

Thanks to the co-operation between mindfulness professionals and contemplatives in Hungary (especially teachers of the Gate of the Dharma Buddhist College in Budapest) there are some innovative initiatives trying to address some of the shortfalls of contemporary mindfulness. These new innovations include:

1. Establishment of the Hungarian Association of Mindfulness and Contemplative Practice Based Applications - This organization is not a simple union of mindfulness professionals but also provides a common space for collaboration of scientific and contemplative institutions.

2. “Life and Mind” - Meditation and Lectures at the National Institute of Oncology
This is a weekly series of programs which includes 1 hour meditation and 1,5 half hour presentation or teaching (Dhamma talk) and conversation led by guest teachers and experts. The guests are mainly venerable teachers of various contemplative traditions (usually Buddhist and Christian) and experts from the intersection of science and contemplative traditions alternately. (Similar to the events of Mind and Life.) They are invited to introduce the way of practice and basic teachings of their lineage or their field of expertise respectively. MBI graduates are usually encouraged to support their practice by attending local contemplative centers, primarily Buddhist. However, not everyone is comfortable relating to the language and iconography of a religious center. On the other hand, in the neutral environment of a health care center they might be more willing to taste the teachings and practices of different lineages of contemplative traditions. If they like any of them, they can go on to explore that tradition in more detail.

3. “Mindfulness - Contemplative Practice and Science”
A Conference Tour - This is a one-day conference event to be held at 5 or 6 major universities in Hungary presenting not only mindfulness-based applications but

also introducing compassion-based programmes and contemplative studies in general. The program is complemented with talks by experienced Buddhist and Christian Contemplation teachers providing a wider picture about the possibilities of Contemplative Sciences.

Hopefully these innovations could provide an example how mindfulness centers and Buddhist educational institutions can work together in order to promote the spread of teachings and practices which lead to wholesome mental states and this way could serve as steps forward to a more mindful and compassionate society.

In my opinion, this is a very interesting age. In the past, science and contemplative practices were strictly separated in the western part of the world. Now we can see that these two disciplines are coming closer to each other. Both contemplative traditions and science helped and helps millions of people in the alleviation of suffering and enhancing well-being. Both are sources of wisdom and special knowledge. I like to believe that Mind and Life was brought to life because of true respect and true interest from the contemplative side (namely H.H. the Dalai Lama) towards science and vice versa. It is natural, that many concerns and critiques may arise around such an important encounter, like science meet contemplative traditions. The ongoing dialogue and the unfolding collaboration of these two disciplines may give birth to a better understanding of the nature of the mind and of ourselves. We, humanity, just took our first steps on this joint path. With true respect and true interest towards each other we can walk together on this path for long. Probably, present mindfulness- and compassion-based applications are not the end of this process. Hopefully we will

see the development of novel skilful applications for the benefit of all beings.

Gratitude

I always finish my MBSR / MBCT classes and the Monday evening community events (“Life and Mind” - Meditation and Lectures at the National Institute of Oncology) expressing my gratitude and deep thank to the audience for their true interest and their presence. I feel grateful for them to come to practice together, listen to the talks, and engage in insightful conversations. It is a similar moment; I bow and thank you for your interest, for reading this short paper. I hope it inspired you. May we walk together on this path building a peaceful and caring community on this beautiful planet. May all beings be well and happy.

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