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MINDFULNESS-BASED COGNITIVE THERAPY

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“Mindfulness lies at the core of Buddhist meditative practice, yet its essence is universal. It has to do with refining our capacities for paying attention, for sustained and penetrative awareness and for emergent insight that is beyond thought but can be articulated through thought.

Strictly speaking mindfulness is not a technique or method, although there are different and techniques methods for its utilization. Rather it is more aptly described as a way of being.

(Jon Kabbat-Zinn, 2002)

Kabat-Zinn adds that we intentionally suspend the impulse to characterise, evaluate and judge what one is experiencing and thus we move away from the auto-pilot, the conditioned and habitual unexamined thought and emotional processes. In my practice as a therapist using Buddhist meditation techniques these insights opened up new horizons for using Buddhist meditation techniques in therapy. Most of the early work emerged in the cognitive therapy for depression by Mark Williams.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy started as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Therapy by Kabbat-Zinn and then had links with MBCT for depression. In general the universal vulnerabilities and challenges that people had was the focus of these emergent therapeutic systems. Kabbat-Zinn

emphasises the point that it is basically paying attention to experience in a particular manner, on purpose in the present moment, so that the mind does not slip into the past.

It also implies a systematic unfolding of practice through body scan, sitting meditation and mindful moment. There is a focus on the body, feelings, emotions and thought patterns reminding us of the layout of the Buddhist Satipatthana Sutta. Developing kindness and compassion towards oneself, an intrinsic curiosity with a focus on the present are important features. Like the emphasis of the Buddha there is a focus on human vulnerability.

Automatic Pilot

The habitual pattern of avoiding unpleasant emotions and thoughts, and what is described as rumination and experiential avoidance are the features of the mind working as automatic pilot—the weight of habits. The ruminating tendency attempts to get rid of unwanted problems. And there tend to grow a load of unprocessed material.

Mindfulness in Therapy

With this background I wish to focus on mindfulness practice in therapy:

It is non-conceptual—it is an awareness without absorption in the past ; present centered; as it is always in the present movement; non-judgmental; intentional; participant observation; non-verbal; explorative; liberating; freedom from conditioned suffering. These qualities would occur simultaneously in each movement of mindfulness (Germer, 2005).

Working alongside Segal, Williams and Teesdale, Kabat-Zinn inspired and assisted in what is now known as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT).

Focus on the Body and Emotions

I have introduced the basic perspectives of MBCT and instead of presenting a long introduction to MBCT, I am selecting two areas of common interest to MBCT and my practice as a therapist using Buddhist meditation both in therapy and normal practice, which will indicate the larger terrain of Buddhist practice.

Our breath is the royal road to getting in touch with the body. We often take our breath for granted but when we open ourselves to the breath it gets to the core of our being and it is a sensitive monitor for our body and emotions and is a check when the mind is wandering and about to get distracted.

“Because the theme of connecting to the present is examined in the sitting meditation, participants are asked to observe in the body these reactions of aversion or attachment that arise during the practice. They are invited to notice how such reactions are powerful competitors for attention and often take awareness from the breath, moving the focus to other, seemingly vital thoughts or feelings. The practice of mindfulness can be a powerful ally, allowing us to notice when this has occurred and to regain the ability to choose where we wish to place our attention in the moment. Note that the aim of the practice is not relaxation or even happiness. Rather it is the freedom from the tendency to get drawn into automatic reactions to pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and events”, Segal et al, 2002, 193).

Buddhist Perspectives of Managing the Body and Emotions

There has been an important question. To what extent does early Buddhism, while integrating the above reflections of MBCT go beyond it as a *vipassana* meditation tradition? The best answer to this question has been given by a therapist working on both MICBT (Mindfulness Integrated Cognitive behaviour therapy) and the Buddhist *vipassana* tradition, Bruno A. Cayoun (Cayoun, 2015). He also brings an ethical dimension referring to the unproductive ways in which people seek happiness, what we describe as immoral behaviour but using psychological categories for recovery. He presents an insightful four stage path for recovery (2015, 55). (i) Mindfulness meditation requires us to pay attention to our bodily experience, increasing awareness of body sensations in an objective way without making judgments about the experience; (ii) increase sensory perception without judgments about the experience (ii) decreasing evaluation (iii) decrease reaction. (iv) The more we practice more established is the mental equilibrium. If there is a disequilibrium, it is difficult to handle reactive habits.

The other important point is to use the technique of developing *interoception* (*indriyapatibaddha nana*) which implies meditative access to bodily sensations. Here is the clarification of what is described by neuroscientists as *interoception* :

When the breath becomes finer and the mind settles, we arrive at a consciousness unrelated to the senses. The mind is no longer running after sense impingements. This state of mind cannot discern good and bad or react to

pleasure and disappointment. It is a state of mind that stays in the middle...At this stage, we observe a preliminary or primordial form of consciousness—one that cannot be experienced through sense faculties. In Pali, this consciousness is called *anindriyapatibattha vinnana*. (Dhammajiva, 8).

The technique of *vipassana* meditation presented by Venerable Dhammajiva is the development of four elements of vibration patterns which have been skilfully integrated by Bruno Cayoun. Body sensations will emerge in consciousness with a one or two dominant vibration patterns: mass, motion, temperature, fluidity. Body sensations are strictly neither physical nor purely mental, they are a link between the body and mind. Different patterns of body sensations generate different emotion maps. For example anger will tend to manifest itself with a predominance of increased temperature (heat) and motion, increased heart rate with agitation. Sadness is experienced with a predominance of increased heaviness in head, neck and shoulder and perhaps decreased fluidity (constriction of the throat). Fear generally manifests with decrease of fluidity in chest and abdomen.

The direct consequence of our judgments is an effect on the body, and modern emotion research shows that that body sensations are crucial elements of emotional processing. But it is necessary to make a distinction between physical discomfort and mental discomfort. Bruno presents a co-emergent processes of thoughts and body sensations.

Co-emergent body sensations are experienced through “interoception”, which is the sensory perception of the body interior, including the physical experience of our

emotions. This is what the neuroscientists call the “sixth sense”, which makes us feel that we exist, that our sense of self is real (Cayoun, 2015, 49).

The more self-referential greater is the intensity of the sensations in the body. Cayoun says that thirty years of psychological research that mindfulness meditation uses skilfully applied mental effort to specifically create a balance between the four vibratory patterns/four elements.

Mindfulness meditation is practicing equilibrium. Cayoun says that if we learn to feel body sensations while not reacting to them, not identifying with them, desensitization takes place. We move away from our habitual reactions.

Body Sensations According to MBCT

To come to our senses, both literally and metaphorically, on the big scale as a species and on the smaller scale as a single human being, we first need to return to the body, the locus within which the biological senses and what we call the mind arise (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, 10)

To learn to be with direct experience as it arises in the mind and focusing on different facets of the body, especially the arising of sensation provide a door to the present moment. As Rebeca Crane says we had the ability to know our body before we were able to talk: “The price we pay for being language-based is that labelling our experience offers us a means to objectify and separate from it. In our predominantly verbal way of feeling and expressing ourselves it can feel counterintuitive to move into the body and allow the body to reveal to us what is here. One of the processes taking place in a mindfulness-based course is learning to trust in this unfolding and allow space for this more intuitive and intimate

knowing and understanding to emerge. Ultimately the learning and insight that arises in this visceral way may be integrated with our thinking processes and even articulated verbally—the dialogue that happens within a mindfulness based course facilitates a translation of felt sense into integrated learning...”Crane, 2009, 50). Thus in a deeper sense we are re-learning our ability to directly perceive through the senses of hearing, smelling, tasting, seeing and touching.

Thoughts, Feelings and the Body

If one glances through the Buddhist *Satipatthana* you will find that there is a focus on the body, feelings and thought patterns. The cognitive theories of emotions as different from the body based theories help us to distinguish fear from anger, sadness from depression, nature of intense jealousy and malice. Cognitive therapy as found in MBCT focuses in changing patterns of thinking Segal et al, 2002,248-250). They first attempt to make the relationship to thoughts more explicit and make them objects of awareness.

Thought patterns make the emotions and we are gripped by the emotions and as the poem below express we need to welcome them:

This being human is a guest house
Every morning is a new arrival
A joy, as a depression, a meanness
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor

Welcome and entertain them all

(RUMI)

Thus we lay out ‘a red carpet’ for which one recoils and does not want to feel. Unwanted feelings and emotions need to be brought within mindfulness as done in MBCT.

Contemporary Evaluations of MBCT

J.Mark Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn during recent times consulted practitioners , therapists Buddhist scholars and psychologists across the world to make an evaluation of the practice of MBCT over the years (*Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives On its Meaning, Origins and Applications*. 2013). This book also included a celebrated Buddhist monk, Bhikkhu Bodhi whose comments I use for the concluding section of the present study.

There have been critical comments occasionally regarding this marriage of the Buddha Dhamma and science and towards the concluding part of the book Kabbat-Zinn writes these most touching words that betray his honest commitment to a worthy project.

It is my hope that people attracted to this field will come to appreciate the profound transformational potential of the dharma in its most universal and skilful articulation through their own meditation training and practice. Mindfulness can only be understood from the inside out. It is not one more behavioural technique to be deployed in 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 it mattered. (2013, 284).

Kabat.Zinn says the motivation for this project was to relieve suffering and catalyse greater compassion and wisdom in our lives and culture and he says that this is still the primary momentum.

It is inevitable that mindfulness and other practices adopted from Buddhism will find new applications in the modern West where world views and lifestyles are so different from those of southern and eastern Asia. If such practices benefit those who do not accept the full framework of Buddhist teaching, I see no reason to grudge them the right to take what they need. To the contrary I feel that those who adapt the Dhamma to these new purposes are to be admired for their pioneering courage and insight. As long as they act with prudence and a compassionate intent, let them make use of the Dhamma in any way they can help others. (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2013, 36).

BEYOND MBCT

I have already referred to MiCBT as going beyond MBCT, as Bruno Cayoun its expositor integrates *vipassana* meditation into his system. So in this context, MiBCT is closer to Buddhist vipassana practice. Bruno himself learnt the Buddhist insight practices from Goenka. My own practice in vipassana was learnt under the celebrated guru, Uda Eriyagama Dhammajiva whose guru was Sayadaw U Panditha Maha Thero.“

The Deeper Parts of Our Life

The second critical point has been made by Craig Hassad of the Monash University Medical Faculty. He says that with the

development of Positive Psychology by Martin Seligman there was a focus on “Caring for the deeper parts of ourselves”(Hassad, 2014, 173): “The third type of happiness comes from having a sense of meaning and purpose. This is more resilient still, because if we are in touch we can find meaning in any moment...” (2014, 173). Thus this goes beyond MBCT.

Peak Experiences

Also another line of criticism is the work done by Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi on the “flow experience’, an experiment conducted with athletes, musicians and dancers and others: the experience of intense effortless focus, where time seems to slow down, thoughts settle and everything becomes calm and clear. This is a new line of research on stress, mental health and wellbeing, beyond stress, anxiety and depression, deeply Buddhistic. (Hassad, 2014, 28-29).

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