

# Mindfulness: Significant Common Confusions

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**Abstract** Mindfulness is critically analyzed in terms of its possible components, with an emphasis on practical implications of common confusions. Mindfulness as a construct is discussed relative to concentration, awareness, insight, attitude, and awakening. Other issues include the distinction between behaviors of the mind and contents of the mind and concerns about taking mindfulness out of its Buddhist context. The evolution of psychological mindfulness in North America and Asia is briefly discussed.

**Keywords** Mindfulness · Buddhism · Psychology · Concentration · Insight

## Introduction

The purpose of this article was to stimulate clearer thinking about and application of mindfulness, however one chooses to define it. This is primarily done by describing basic mental processes that must be considered and differentiated. Also included are a few observations and opinions, a field report of a participant/observer. These views are not offered as true or commonly held, just observations to stimulate thoughts. A more restricted and traditional Western academic discussion of some of the issues, plus related references, is available elsewhere (Mikulas 2002, 2007).

If one uses the conceptual distinctions discussed below to more directly encounter the mental processes in one's own consciousness, then this would be similar to the pointing out techniques of Tibetan Buddhism. Relatedly, if one mindfully explores these processes in one's own body/

mind, then one is engaged in Buddhist vipassana meditation, the insight meditation of Theravada Buddhism.

Critical distinctions include how mindfulness relates to awareness, concentration, and attitude. Common confusions here have very significant applied implications, as will be discussed. At a time when the popularity of mindfulness is resulting in many people developing treatment programs, measures, and theories of what is called "mindfulness," it is very important to be clearer on what we are talking about. And this clarity will significantly improve the effectiveness of our programs and the usefulness of our research.

## Contents vs. Behaviors of the Mind

The first major distinction is between the contents of the mind and what I call "behaviors of the mind." Contents of the mind includes the various objects that arise in one's consciousness, such as perceptions, memories, thoughts, and feelings. This includes the self as object, the various thoughts, memories, and feelings one has about one's "self." For most people, the contents of the mind is the reality they inhabit.

Behaviors of the mind are those processes of the mind (or brain if one prefers) that select and construct the contents and that provide awareness of the contents. Behaviors of the mind occur prior to, during, and in response to any particular contents. Western psychologists and philosophers often confuse and confound contents of the mind with behaviors of the mind. Behaviors of the mind can be defined operationally, studied directly and through interactions with other behaviors, operantly and respondently conditioned, and shown to differ neurophysiologically. There are three fundamental and omnipresent behaviors of the mind: clinging, concentration, and awareness. Clinging refers to the tendency of the mind to grasp for and cling to certain contents of the mind. Concentration refers to the focus of the mind. And awareness refers to one's conscious experience of the contents, including properties of breadth and clarity.

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The mind has a tendency to crave for and cling to certain sensations, perceptions, beliefs, expectations, opinions, rituals, images of self, and models of reality. In Buddhism, this results in *dukkha* (suffering, unsatisfactoriness) as described in the Four Noble Truths (Rahula 1974). Working with attachments that result from clinging is also a central part of yogic psychology. In addition to *dukkha*, clinging also commonly results in resistance to change, distortion in perceptions and memories, and impairment in thinking.

Concentration is the learned control of the focus of one's attention; it is the behavior of keeping one's awareness, with varying degrees of one-pointedness, on a particular set of contents of the mind. In Western psychology, concentration is generally seen as one aspect of attention, sometimes discussed in terms of focused attention, controlled attention, sustained attention, or vigilance. However, these literatures usually refer more to the readiness and/or ability to detect the critical signal rather than the skill to maintain the desired focus of attention. Developing concentration improves tasks such as studying and listening, and it has applications in a variety of areas, including therapy, education, sports, and art. Implications for some cases of attention disorder (e.g., ADD/ADHD) have received little attention.

If a person sits quietly and practices a concentration form of meditation, then the mind becomes calm and relaxed, which often relaxes the body. This biological relaxation is, by far, the most researched effect of meditation in Western literature (Andresen 2000). If a Western psychology text mentions meditation, it is usually in terms of relaxation and/or stress reduction. Concentration-produced relaxation can be an effective treatment of anxiety (DelMonte 1985). The quieting of the mind that comes from concentration gives the practitioner more control over thoughts, an effect with great potential significance for Western psychology.

Awareness, as a behavior of the mind, is the active maximizing of the breadth and clarity of awareness. This is very similar to the way "mindfulness" is often described in many Buddhist literatures (if mindfulness is understood to be a property/state rather than a process/practice, then this behavior of the mind refers to cultivation of mindfulness rather than mindfulness itself). Below, I have many qualifications for how mindfulness is understood in Buddhism; so for now, I stay with the term awareness.

The awareness behavior of the mind involves simply observing the contents and processes of the mind; it is just being aware, bare attention, detached observation, choiceless awareness. It is not thinking, judging, or categorizing; it is being aware of these mental processes. The essence of training is simply noticing whatever arises in consciousness while minimizing the occurrence of getting lost in related thoughts, reactions, and elaborations. Traditionally, it is cultivated during sitting and walking meditation, as found

in the Theravada vipassana literature. "Vipassana" means clear seeing in new, varied, and extraordinary ways.

Vipassana meditation is often called "insight meditation" because it is held that cultivation of mindfulness leads to a form of insight called *prajna*, an immediately experienced intuitive wisdom. *Prajna* involves mindful and penetrating seeing into the fundamental nature of things in a way that transforms one's being, the ultimate purpose of meditation in Buddhism. For example, insightful seeing of impermanence leads to a reduction of clinging.

There are many important practical implications to separating contents of the mind and behaviors of the mind. For example, clinging is always problematic regardless of whether the object clung to is desirable or not by various practical, financial, psychological, ethical, and legal considerations. Thus, exercising or meditating may be desirable for many reasons, but clinging to these activities is always a problem. There are no "positive addictions."

In the case of concentration, a very important understanding is that concentration can be developed in any situation, although it is, of course, easier in some situations. Realization of this fact will lead to more and better incorporation of concentration into our therapeutic and educational programs (e.g., as part of listening exercises in couples therapy or keeping your "eye on the ball" in several sports). Related is the understanding that concentration as a learned skill is independent of the object of concentration. For example, an athlete could develop concentration while listening to music and then apply this skill to keep from being distracted by crowd noise during a sporting event. Usually, concentration is first developed as sustained attention, keeping one's mind focused on a particular object or class of objects. Eventually, the practitioner develops moment-to-moment concentration, the ability to stay clearly focused on the object even when the mind is quickly moving from one object to another.

In the case of awareness, the object of awareness and the awareness itself arise in consciousness together. Thus, they are often confused and confounded. What is largely unknown in Western psychology is the fact and extent of developing a generic awareness independent of specific contents. Also, awareness, like concentration, can potentially be cultivated in any situation. This means that whatever else we are doing, we can always add in an awareness component. It also means we can be more creative and individualized in our exercises to develop awareness.

### Concentration vs. Awareness

The behaviors of the mind of concentration and awareness are very distinct processes. They differ in nature, effects,

cultivation, and neurological correlates, and they are clearly seen as different in the Buddhist literature. The fourth Noble Truth is the Eight-Fold Path (Rahula, 1974), of which number 7 is right mindfulness (awareness) and number 8 is right concentration, both of which need to be cultivated. Similarly, the seven factors of the enlightened mind include mindfulness and concentration as separate factors (Pandita 1992). The other factors are investigation, effort, rapture, calm, and equanimity. Mindfulness is considered primary as it facilitates the awakening, strengthening, and keeping in balance of the six factors.

All the world's major meditation practices involve some combination of concentration and awareness. Buddhism is unique in the emphasis it gives to awareness/mindfulness. Other traditions emphasize concentration and the absorption it can lead to. The classic Buddhist/yogic literature describes two separate paths, the path of concentration/absorption and the path of awareness/insight (Buddhaghosa 1975). North American psychology and culture have been strongly influenced by the mindfulness-based path of insight. Much less known is the path of concentration (e.g., Khema 1997).

Although concentration and awareness are clearly different, they are very often confused and confounded. The main reason for this is that they are very intertwined. A change in one often produces a change in the other. And meditation practices and training programs primarily targeting one usually also impact the other as well. Quieting the mind with concentration makes it easier to be aware. And the degree of focus of the mind is one thing one becomes more aware of, and hence one can more readily develop concentration.

Although Western psychologists have discovered Buddhist mindfulness, they know surprisingly little about the development of concentration. Most attention and ADD/ADHD theorists do not know that concentration is a learned skill that can be improved with training, a fact well known for thousands of years in Asia. Over a century ago, William James (1890, p. 424) argued that concentration “is the very root of judgment, character, and will” and an “education which should improve this faculty would be education par excellence.” I think that the confusing and confounding of awareness and concentration is currently the major problem in Western approaches to mindfulness. In one highly referenced article, the proposed definition of mindfulness is a definition of concentration. Other definitions include references to concentration-based properties. Many research studies report how mindfulness helped the subjects quiet their minds, get some distance from their cognitions, relax into the here and now, to other results that are primarily due to the development of concentration, often unintentionally. How much more effective would these programs be if they directly trained concentration? Similarly, many of the recent

tests of mindfulness are measuring some combination of awareness, concentration, and attitude.

### Attitude

By “attitude,” I mean the mental set in which one approaches working with the three behaviors of the mind. Attitude includes moods, associations, expectations, and intentions. Optimal attitude includes persistent dedication, a welcoming openness to experience, a readiness to let go, making friends with oneself, and being in the here and now.

Attitude is very important in working with all behaviors of the mind and, thus, with the development of mindfulness. But attitude components are not part of the behaviors of the mind. Attitude can help in the development of awareness, but it is not part of awareness. Rather, one becomes aware of the attitude components.

Most Western academic psychological definitions of mindfulness include attitude components, such as being in the here and now and acceptance. This adds further confusion to understanding mindfulness and can result in problems in application. For example, consider a person who is being trained in an approach to “mindfulness” that emphasizes awareness and being in the here and now. But, like most people, the person has little control over her or his mind and hence struggles with “being in the here and now” and feels unsuccessful at developing mindfulness. However, it is concentration training that helps the person feel more in the here and now. And awareness is independent of the contents of the mind. Rather, one wants to learn to be aware of whatever is arising in consciousness, whether it is considered “here and now” or not (of course, everything that one is aware of is always in the now). If one is caught up in memories, rather than the here and now external situation, then one wants to be aware, in the present, that one is having memories.

Mindfulness has been heavily embraced by North American cognitive behavior therapists and their organization, the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT). Within ABCT, the combination of mindfulness-based therapies and acceptance-based therapies is promoted as being the next wave of cognitive behavioral therapies. Mindfulness and acceptance are intertwined, and prominent ABCT members define mindfulness in terms of acceptance. But mindfulness has nothing to do with accepting or rejecting; mindfulness is simply observing any accepting or rejecting that is done by some other part of the mind. There are many practical problems in confounding mindfulness and acceptance. For example, consider a person who wants to develop mindfulness and believes acceptance is part

of mindfulness. This person will probably have an anti-mindfulness bias against being aware of non-acceptance. And this bias could have important implications, as when working with clinging behaviors and acceptance therapies.

“Equanimity” is a very important concept in Buddhism, a concept related to acceptance. It is equal acceptance and receptivity toward all objects of consciousness, an evenness of mind in which one is not more interested in or drawn to some objects of consciousness than others. One way of producing equanimity is by quieting the mind via concentration. Equanimity is one of the seven factors of enlightenment (Pandita, 1992) which also includes concentration and mindfulness. It can be seen here that mindfulness, concentration, and equanimity are all different, but related.

The most subtle and most profound attitude component is “not-doing” (cf. Mikulas 2004). A fundamental approach to most Buddhist meditation is to simply do the practice without trying to accomplish anything and ultimately to let go of any “meditator” who is doing something. In daily living, non-doing includes not adding an unnecessary heaviness or melodrama to life, getting one’s limited self out of the way, and allowing the situation to spontaneously bring forth the appropriate action. This not-doing is similar to *wu wei* in Taoism. One understanding of enlightenment is that it is always already the case; there is nothing one can do or has to do to obtain enlightenment. Rather, it is often a matter of ceasing the doing of the limited self or ego. This profound understanding can be found in Zen, some of the highest teachings in Tibetan Buddhism (*dzogchen*, *mahamudra*), and *yogic advaita-vedanta*.

### **Buddhist Perspective**

The Buddhist path requires the cultivation of both concentration and awareness, but in practice, there is considerable variation in the sequencing and balancing of these two. For example, in some *vipassana* centers, the students begin with concentration until their minds are stabilized enough to optimize awareness practices. In other centers, students begin with awareness practices, and concentration gradually evolves as a by-product. And skillful teachers often individualize such that at any time, one student may be instructed to emphasize concentration while another is told to emphasize awareness.

The Buddhist path also emphasizes ethical and virtuous behavior (*sila*), as in the Eight-Fold Path and various collections of precepts. This is a central point in the Theravada literature (e.g., Buddhaghosa 1975) where it is emphasized that there are mutual interactions among *sila*, concentration, and *prajna* (mindfulness-produced insight).

The point is that the development of concentration and awareness are both impacted by how ethical and virtuous one’s behavior is (Grossman 2010). From a Buddhist viewpoint, to try to cultivate mindfulness without attending to *sila* is a serious mistake.

This is one example of a general concern that some Buddhist scholars have about extracting mindfulness from its Buddhist context. These scholars feel that mindfulness needs to be embedded in the whole Buddhist program (Kwee 2010). This includes how mindfulness relates to concentration, ethics, insight, dependent origination, karma, social/cultural factors, nature of the “self,” and awakening, among other topics.

The ultimate purpose of all Buddhist practice is enlightenment/awakening. The fact that mindfulness can help reduce many types of suffering and improve the overall health of body and mind is wonderful. But more important is the awakening that results from mindfulness-produced insight (*prajna*). Based on his own experience, the Buddha (awakened one) taught that the path of concentration/absorption could lead to suppression of suffering and defilements, but not to their elimination. Rather, he taught the path of insight which leads to the uprooting of defilements and complete enlightenment.

The average person gets readily pulled into and lost in the contents of mind. This includes clinging to those contents that one associates with one’s self. The process of awakening includes a disidentification with the contents of the mind and an experiential movement into a broader domain of consciousness. By quieting the mind through concentration, one can more easily disidentify with the contents and find the doorway of consciousness between thoughts. This creates the space for insight knowing, which is encouraged by awareness practices.

This aware disidentification with the contents of the mind leads to what I call the witness level where one is a more detached and objective observer of the contents. For some people, this small awakening is very powerful. Previously, they had identified themselves and their realities with contents of their minds; now they know there is much more to both. This facilitates reducing clinging, altering cognitions, and self discovery. Shapiro and Carlson (2009) call this shift in perspective “reperceiving” and suggest that is a primary way that mindfulness works in therapy.

### **Definition**

Social psychologist Ellen Langer (1989) has ongoing research centered around her concept of mindfulness. This creative and significant research includes showing how many social psychological factors impact the health of

mind and body. Langer's "mindfulness" includes being open to novelty, being sensitive to content and perspective, creating new categories, changing mindsets, challenging assumptions, breaking set, getting involved, and taking responsibility. Many of these components are related to the clinging behavior of the mind. Langer's concept of mindfulness is different from the Buddhist concept, as she well knows. For a few years, a number of people confused these two different uses of "mindfulness." For example, a research study would have a mindfulness treatment that was some unspecified blend of these two different types of mindfulness. This confusion is much less common now, but still occurs.

People can define mindfulness as they wish, but they should be very clear about what they are saying. If one wishes to develop a definition inspired by the Buddhist literature, then one must be very clear regarding the distinctions discussed above. Do you define mindfulness as concentration and/or awareness? How does insight fit it? Should a distinction be made between concentration and the calming of the mind? Do you include any attitude components in your definition? Sometimes, in the Buddhist literature, mindfulness is described as a practice or process, and sometimes it is described as a state or property.

My "solution" is to define mindfulness as the behavior of the mind that I above call "awareness" and elsewhere call "mindfulness." Mindfulness, as a behavior of the mind, is the active maximizing of the breadth and clarity of awareness. It includes moving and sharpening the focus of awareness within the field of consciousness. This is how the term is often used in various Buddhist literatures, although in some cases it refers more to the cultivation of mindfulness rather than mindfulness itself. Strengths of this definition include that it is clearly different than concentration and clinging, and it does not include attitudinal components. By staying within my own idiosyncratic concept of "behaviors of the mind," I am not arguing how my definition relates to any specific theories or literatures. The "behavior" part recognizes that mindfulness is influenced by learning and motivation, like all behaviors. In practice, I usually couple mindfulness training with concentration and breathwork.

Rapgay (2010) makes a strong argument for Buddhist mindfulness being a practical blend of concentration and awareness, leading to the ability to achieve direct experience of the object of attention. When studying the fundamental canonical texts of Buddhism, Rapgay does not find much evidence to equate mindfulness and insight. He finds more support for equating mindfulness with concentration and the calming of the mind, or a combination of these with insight. And he finds no evidence for acceptance being a central feature of mindfulness.

## North America

In North America, psychology as a discipline separated from philosophy, divided into experimental and clinical, and fractioned into many different schools of thought. In order to be a "science," psychology distanced itself from religion. In mainstream academia, Buddhism is usually in departments of religion and/or philosophy and, thus, irrelevant or inappropriate for psychology.

When addressing Western audiences, I often begin by pointing out that the basic teachings of the Buddha are really psychology, not religion or philosophy (cf. Mikulas 2007). The Buddha avoided philosophizing and debates with philosophers, particularly about metaphysical questions. The Buddha did not claim to be other than a human being, did not claim any inspiration from a god or external source, and did not want to establish a religion. His teachings have no personal deity or impersonal godhead, no creeds or dogmas, no rituals or worship, and nothing to take on faith. From a Western perspective, the Buddha's teachings are more psychology since they address topics such as sensation, perception, emotion, motivation, cognition, mind, and consciousness. Of course, with Buddha's teachings as a source, there evolved some wonderful and profound Buddhist religions and philosophies.

What is very important to North American psychology is to discover the powerful psychology that lies at the heart of Buddhism. This psychology has significant contributions, many largely unknown, to make to many areas of psychology, including cognitive science, behavior modification, psychoanalysis, and transpersonal psychology (cf. Mikulas 2007). But, for a variety of reasons, including psychology vs. religion, many Western psychologists are hesitant to investigate Buddhism. For example, a decade ago, a North American group interested in developing integrative therapies discovered mindfulness, and they recognized its importance to their endeavor. But rather than turn to the Buddhist literature, they chose to ask each other what they meant and understood about mindfulness.

Earlier it was mentioned that some Buddhist scholars are concerned about pulling mindfulness out of its Buddhist context. Currently, many people who research and apply mindfulness have a very superficial understanding of this broader context. How much more effective could they be with a broader understanding? Similarly, many people who study and teach mindfulness have had little or no serious experience in developing mindfulness in themselves. This should be a prerequisite (Grossman 2010).

In Buddhism, the ultimate function of mindfulness is facilitating awakening. Although this may be discussed in some transpersonal publications, because of its association to religion and philosophy, it is not discussed when

mindfulness is applied to a specialized area, such as stress reduction or cognitive behavior therapy. The strategy is to extract mindfulness from its religious context and apply the technique in a scientific way to a specialized domain. This is often a good approach for certain types of information and is often necessary for publication in mainstream journals. But, an important point is missed: It is not an either-or situation. One can do scientific research on mindfulness in a way that also facilitates the subjects' awakening. The subtleties of this are beyond the current paper.

## Asia

In traditional Asian cultures, there is no word for "psychology" and no role for a psychologist. It makes no sense to treat a person's mind as separate from other concerns, such as nutrition, life force, social relations, to spiritual practices. Psychological health is part of the overall health of body/mind/spirit. When psychology as a separate discipline came to Asia, it was the Western psychology of the colonizers. However, this psychology in Asia is more integrated with other disciplines than in North America. For example, in North America, psychology and philosophy are distinctly different disciplines. But this is not true in India and China. For example, philosophy in China often includes a component of wise practice.

Gradually, Asian countries have been rediscovering their own cultural psychologies to complement/supplement the Western psychologies. A good example of this is the Indian Psychology Book Project. The first major piece of this project was the publication of the *Handbook of Indian Psychology* (Rao et al. 2008), which includes Buddhism, yoga, Western psychology, and other influences on Indian psychology. Indian psychology differs from Western psychology in a number of significant ways.

An earlier example is the Transnational Network for the Study of Physical, Psychological and Spiritual Wellbeing. The Network, based at Waseda University in Japan, evolved into an international community of scholars and practitioners pursuing the interfacing of Eastern and Western thought. Through seven conferences (last in 2002) held throughout the world, plus resulting books, the Network was on the forefront of the East–West integration. Mindfulness was being explored by Network members long before it became popular.

A third example is the first two Asian Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Conferences (Hong Kong, 2006 and Bangkok, 2008). Among other goals, the group hopes to expand cognitive behavior therapy by incorporating Asian perspectives and practices. In papers at these conferences, I suggested that my "behaviors of the mind" was a heuristic

concept for integrating Asian and Western psychologies and that Asian psychologists could be at the forefront of any evolving East–West integration. This is because powerful models and practices for cognitive behavior therapy can be found in Asian health and wisdom traditions, including Buddhism, ayurveda, yoga, Taoism, and Chinese medicine. Mindfulness is a central practice throughout.

Consider Thailand. Relative to mindfulness, the country is filled with teachers, teaching centers, advanced practitioners, and instruction manuals. Before mindfulness became established in the West, many Westerners came to Thailand to learn mindfulness. Now that mindfulness has become popular, Thai psychologists are rediscovering the wonderful resources in their own country. Anticipating this, Dr. Sompoch of Chulalongkorn University is ensuring that some of the newer faculty develop expertise in mindfulness.

## Next?

Will Asian psychologists/philosophers become the leaders in developing a broader understanding of mindfulness, including psychological applications? They have the interest and the resources, and they can avoid many of the confusions that currently limit North American understanding.

Will North American psychologists discover and embrace concentration as they did mindfulness? Will they be open to discovering Buddhist psychology? What if the possibility of awakening was really true?

What role will European, South American, and other psychologists play in all this? Europeans were far ahead of Americans in terms of seeking out and incorporating Eastern thought, and many European psychologists have been involved with mindfulness for some time. South American psychology can be more eclectic and flexible than many other psychologies, and there have been complex Asian influences throughout South America.

From a Buddhist perspective, one thing is sure: The cultivation of mindfulness facilitates anything one does. We want to find practical and individualized ways to cultivate mindfulness in education, sports, music, art, therapy, and personal/spiritual growth. At one level, we can help people's lives work better, reduce suffering, and increase happiness. At another level, all of this is part of a broader, more interconnected transpersonal awakening. Namaste.

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