The End of Suffering-deconstructing mindfulness.

Mindfulness is now embedded in the popular culture. It is advertised as an important stress reduction technology as well as a generalized strategy to increase our overall happiness. This is a very recent phenomenon and the intriguing question is: How did a monastic religious practice from East Asia escape the Buddhist monasteries and enter the mainstream in the USA?

What the original role of mindfulness?
Mindfulness for what?
Mindful of what?

Mindfulness (meditation) has its origin in Buddhist practice. The immediate difficulty that arises is this: which Buddhism? The historical Buddha lived and taught around 500 B.C. in Northern India. He taught by engaging in dialogues with people and through sermons. He did not write anything down. His teachings were memorized by his contemporary students and later generations of converts and only 200+ years after his death these memorizations were committed to writing in the Pali language-resulting in the so called Pali Canon (PC). The PC is the closest we have to the original words of the Buddha.

As happens with all religions, different factions arose in the centuries after the Buddha’s” death with different interpretations of the text. When the Dharma spread into Central Asia and China, eventually reaching Japan and Korea, different schools of Buddhism formed that added a great deal of new texts (attributed to the Buddha) and developed significant differences their understanding and practices.

For our investigation we will stay with the PC.
However, the PC was compiled by different ‘editors’ living in widely separated areas of the Indian subcontinent. A great number of inconsistencies and contradictory statement accumulated in the record. In addition, the different compilers had developed different interpretation of the meaning of many of the Buddha’s statements.

Clearly, we PC needs to be ‘cleaned up’ and made accessible to English speaking readers of the 21rst century. We like the down to earth translation and interpretations of Stephen Batchelor and highly recommend his book exploring the PC (1).

So let’s listen to the Buddha as he talks to his monks on the topic of mindfulness:

And what, bhikkhus, is the unconditioned? An ending of desire, an ending of hatred, an ending of delusion: this is the unconditioned. And what, bhikkhus, is the path leading to the unconditioned? Mindfulness directed to the body: this is called the path leading to the unconditioned (2).

Here are Batchelor’s comments on this passage:

“The unconditioned is an ending of three inclinations (sankhāra): desire, hatred, and delusion. Note that Gotama does not define it as an ending of (or escape from) what is conditioned as such. Instead he points to a possibility that, starting with mindfulness of the body, one can learn to lead one’s life unconditioned by desire, hatred, and delusion. In other words, rather than blindly following the inclinations that prompt one to act on one’s desires and fears, one trains oneself to dwell in a still and lucid frame of mind that no longer inclines in such ways. In this sense, one might translate asakhata as “uninclined” rather than “unconditioned.”
Here the Buddha discusses happiness and its impermanence:

What is the delight of life? What is the tragedy of life? What is the emancipation of life? Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me: The happiness and joy that arise conditioned by life, that is the delight of life; that life is impermanent, difficult, and changing, that is the tragedy of life; the removal and abandonment of grasping for life, that is the emancipation of life. So long as I did not know the delight, tragedy, and emancipation of life, I did not claim to have found a peerless awakening in this world (3).

And here again Batchelor comments:
Not only does this show that awakening occurs entirely within the context of empirical experience (“the all”), but it shows that awakening consists of a threefold reorientation to experience rather than the attainment of a single privileged insight into an ultimate truth such as the Unconditioned. Moreover, such a reorientation acknowledges that the tragic nature of life does not negate the richness and delight of life. The key to such an awakening lies in emancipating oneself from the pernicious habit of grasping, which turns one’s life into a frustrated and pointless struggle to preserve what is delightful while banishing or ignoring what is tragic (4). The very enjoyment of pleasure includes the poignant anticipation of its end (5).

Here is Batchelor’s ‘Mission Statement’ for the purpose of Mindfulness Training:
Dukkha (daily suffering in life) is the tragic dimension of life, implicit in experience because the world is constantly shifting and changing into something else. Dukkha is life’s minor key, its bittersweet taste, its annoyingly fugitive charm, its fascinating and terrifying sublimity. The origin of dukkha lies in the very structure of the world itself, not in an emotion such as craving or an erroneous cognition such as ignorance. A
contingent and impermanent world like ours is not the kind of place where we will find enduring happiness. Yet the more we wholeheartedly open ourselves to and embrace this tragic dimension, the more we appreciate the beauty, joy, and enchantment of the world: precisely because they are fleeting and destined to vanish (6).

Dharma practice has to do with coming to terms with experience itself, through cultivating embodied attention, mindfulness, concentration, empathy, and compassion. A central part of this process entails overcoming certain perceptual distortions that lead to patterns of reactivity that block the flow of the stream of the path. Whether such perceptual adjustments thereby disclose an objective “truth” is beside the point. What matters is whether the relinquishing of such perceptions facilitates cultivation of the eightfold path. Experience is constituted out of what appears to us through our senses (including our inner mental sense). It has nothing to do with ontological realities (quantum fluctuations, atoms, subtle consciousness, God) that lie hidden behind what appears to us (7).

Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, human beings tend to perceive themselves and the world as permanent, satisfactory, and as “me” or “mine.” These instinctive perceptual habits are traditionally explained as the result of ignorance, craving, and our karmic inheritance. Today we could understand them as the legacy of evolution, as selected behavioral traits that have conferred survival advantages on our ancestors and their kin over long stretches of time. The practice of embodied attention challenges our habitual perceptions of self and world as permanent, satisfactory, and intrinsically ours. By stabilizing attention through mindfulness and concentration, we begin to see for ourselves how pleasurable and painful feelings trigger habitual patterns of reactivity and craving. These two insights not only undermine our inclinations to hold on to what we like and to push away what we fear but open up the possibility of thinking, speaking, and acting otherwise (8).
Since emotions appear to be rooted deep in our limbic system as the legacy of biological evolution, regulation might be all that is possible and feasible. Rather than suffer fires that erupt and engulf us, we might learn how to adjust our inner airflow to enable them to become like the steady blue flame of a Bunsen burner. In this way, perhaps, we could discover how to burn like miniature suns (9).

These excerpts give you a sense of the ‘Naturalizing of Buddhism’ that Batchelor has done here so brilliantly. It preserves the essential elements of the Buddha’s own formulation. This is lost in the westernized Mindfulness movement, in particular the ethical dimension. Mindfulness is more than a psychological technology. Its impact can be more profound if the Buddha’s insights (which were never religious in nature) are mindfully preserved.

In the next blog we will unpack the ideas of happiness and wellbeing to prepare us for the eventual step of relating the whole story to circuits in the brain.

(1) Stephen Batchelor (2015), After Buddhism. Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age. Yale Univ. Press.

(2) Bodhi, Bhikkhu (Trans.). Sayutta Nikāya 43: 1, Bodhi (2000), p. 1372


