



The Mindful Society

Not long ago seen as fringey and foreign, mindfulness practice is going mainstream. ANDREA MILLER looks at five fields where people are seeing the benefits of mindful living.

MINDFULNESS IS being purposefully aware. It is noticing what we are experiencing and our response to those experiences. It isn't simply *knowing* we are eating an apple. It is paying precise yet relaxed attention to the sweet smell and to the crunch between our teeth; it is paying attention to the glossy red skin and the bruise near the stem.

Mindfulness is contemplation, meditation—and it is not only for Buddhists. Most spiritual traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, have profound contemplative practices. The Buddhist approach to mindfulness, however, is often seen as a valuable tool for people of all faiths (or no faith) because it doesn't require a belief system. Therefore, it's possible to engage in Buddhist-style mindfulness without having to give up a belief in Allah or science or skepticism or any other form of belief.

To gauge the inroads mindfulness is making into our culture—as a nonsectarian method to enhance people's lives—I've done a spot survey of how mindfulness practice is benefiting people in five different sectors: health and healing, caregiving, education,

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LEFT: MICK HALES, RIGHT: THE INNER RESILIENCE PROGRAM

LEFT: PHOTO COURTESY OF BALCONY RELEASING, LTD., RIGHT: ANDREA ROTH

prisons, and organizational leadership. I've highlighted a few representative people and organizations out of the many employing mindfulness as part of their mission.

Mindfulness is everywhere. It's being used by the five categories of people in this article, as well as by many other self-identified groups: activists, people of color, gays and lesbians, homemakers, athletes, and many, many others. Mindfulness can be used by virtually anyone to find balance—whatever the opportunities and challenges of their particular way of life.

Because mindfulness asks us to study the working of our minds, it leads to self-knowledge—knowledge of how we can best use our energies. It helps us to see the big picture: what's important and what's not. It helps us to develop concentration and clear thinking, which makes us more productive. And it reduces our stress and anxiety, which improves our overall health.

Scientists are just now unraveling why and how mindfulness benefits the human brain and body. But for thousands of years, asking why and how has not necessarily been the point.

Left to right: Practicing mindfulness at the Garrison Institute; a student in the Inner Resilience Program meditating; prisoners practicing in The Dhamma Brothers documentary film; rehabilitating after a stroke.

Lucia Meijer, whom I interviewed for this article, puts it this way: "Asking why mindfulness works is like asking why detergent works. We just know if you wash something in the stuff, when it comes out, it's clean."

Health and Healing

In 2000, the National Institutes of Health financed three studies on the effects of mindfulness. It's now financing more than fifty. This reflects a growing worldwide interest in the effects of meditation on health and healing.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., is usually credited with sparking this movement. He is the founder and former executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts medical school, and he is also the founder and former director of its Stress Reduction Clinic. The method he developed, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), has been taught to hundreds of thousands



Above: A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction class in Boulder, Colorado; left: a professional training program at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School; below: scanning the brain of Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard at the Waisman Brain Imaging Lab at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.



TOP: ALAN RABOLD, LEFT: DAVID SILVER, RIGHT: WAISMAN BRAIN IMAGING LABS

of people. Some 85 percent of them report that the practice has healed them in some way.

“My original work was with people with chronic-pain conditions who were told by doctors, ‘You’re going to have to learn to live with this condition,’” says Kabat-Zinn. “Mindfulness offered them some ways to do that learning.”

“So, then,” I suggest, “mindfulness just teaches us to accept our painful conditions.”

No, Kabat-Zinn corrects me. It doesn’t *just* teach acceptance; acceptance is huge. “My working definition of healing is coming to terms with things as they are. That’s very different from curing. With curing there is the expectation that things will be restored to the way they were before.”

Mindfulness, however, does seem to affect more than attitude. In one study Kabat-Zinn was involved with, psoriasis

patients practicing mindfulness healed at four times the rate of non-meditators. In another study, mindfulness was taught to a group of healthy employees in a work environment but was not taught to a control group. Those who meditated showed significant improvements in immune function.

Intriguing research regarding meditation and healing—particularly psychological healing—has also emerged from the Mind and Life Institute, which came into being at a groundbreaking conference in 1987 that brought together world-renowned scientists and Buddhist contemplatives, including the Dalai Lama. Mind and Life has since hosted sixteen conferences and started an annual summer research institute.

Some of its best-known work has been done at the University of Wisconsin by Mind and Life board member Richard Davidson and a group of scientists and practitioners, including the

Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalograms (EEG), the Davidson team has shown that meditators can regulate their cerebral activity to attain more focus and composure. By contrast, untrained subjects focusing on a single task are usually unable to do so for a sustained period. The monks who had practiced the longest showed the greatest brain changes, which may indicate that they’ve effected permanent neural change. The brain changes observed during Davidson’s study of compassion meditation suggest that intensively generating goodwill engenders an extreme state of well-being.

Research such as Davidson’s has enormous implications for the field of psychology. For a long time, doctors have relied on neurotransmitter-altering drugs to change the brain’s physical or chemical makeup to improve a patient’s mental well-being. It now seems that one’s mood can be altered by the opposite route as well: changing subjective, qualitative experience can actually have an impact on the brain’s physical or chemical makeup. Researchers coined the term “neuroplasticity” to describe the ability of the brain to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections based on experience.

But a word of caution: meditation may not be an appropriate remedy for every condition. It can worsen schizophrenia, paranoia, and other disorders in which boundaries between self and other blur. Meditation may also be virtually impossible for someone in the midst of a depressive episode, since depression compromises concentration.

According to Zindel Segal, Ph.D., co-author of *The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*, meditation could also be detrimental if it stands in the way of people accessing other kinds of care. “If you’re in the middle of a depressive episode, spurning psychotherapy or an antidepressant in favor of meditation might not be a good idea,” he says. “You’d want to access psychotherapy or an antidepressant early on and then, when you’re feeling better, switch to a meditative practice to help yourself stay well.”

Segal has conducted studies on the effects of meditation for people who have had three or more depressive episodes, and the results indicate that the practice does help them prevent depression. Meditation lets people know that even in the midst of distress, they can still feel grounded.

Caregiving

“We’re so good at the high-tech medical stuff,” says Judy Lief, a workshop leader for caregivers and hospice workers and author of *Making Friends with Death: A Buddhist Guide to Encountering Mortality*. “But there is a lot of pressure, a lot of speed, and not

a lot of support for people who are caring for the ill and the dying. As a result, there tends to be a lot of burnout.”

To combat this problem, a growing number of caregivers are finding that mindfulness practice helps them renew their energies. Instead of getting wrapped up in the intensity of their work and in all of the tasks they must perform, mindfulness allows caregivers to identify their own needs and fulfill them. This is critical because it is impossible for caregivers to look after others when they can’t look after themselves. Anne Cason, a co-founder and director of Dana Home Care and the author of *Circles of Care: How to Set Up Quality Home Care for Our Elders*, says that self-care begins with the basics: notice when you feel hungry and have a snack; notice when you feel thirsty and have a drink.

Mindfulness also helps caregivers stay in the present moment; it helps them let go of protocol when it isn’t appropriate. Imagine you’re caring for an older person, says Cason, and you’ve been told to give her a bath, fix her lunch, and clean the kitchen. “But she’s having a hard day and keeps saying ‘I want to go for a ride.’ You can’t just do what you’ve been told. You have to stop and pay attention to this person and then find out how you can get the job done.”



Kim McCoy of Circles of Care with 88-year-old Pearl Ormsbee at an assisted-living facility in Portland, Oregon.

The mindful caregiver might choose to immediately take the woman for a short drive or simply say, “Yes, let’s go for a ride today, but first let’s give you a bath.” Whatever the approach, staying in the present moment allows the caregiver to connect—to hear what’s being asked and to consider the options. “Unless there is connection,” says Cason, “the elder will probably feel the caregiver is being aggressive. She’ll feel like some kind of little machine the caregiver is there to wash and dress.”

“The feedback I get from people being cared for by someone practicing mindfulness is that they feel seen as people, apart from the medical or mental problem,” says Lief. “Mindful caregivers are able to listen more, talk less, and utilize a more sophisticated understanding of non-verbal communication. It also helps them to not rush to judgment, and being less judgmental really helps when you’re dealing with someone who so frequently has to be judged and advised, poked, and prodded.”

It can also be safer to delay judgment. Imagine, says Cason, “you see an old woman sitting in a chair and her hands are shaking. You think she’s upset but then you find out she has Parkinson’s. Don’t just jump to conclusions. Let each situation you’re working with touch you.”

In the field of caregiving, mindfulness has perhaps most profoundly touched hospice work. According to Frank Ostaseski, founder of both the Metta Institute and the Zen Hospice Project, when a caregiver is mindfully serving a hospice patient, the relationship is always mutually beneficial. “The eyes of a dying patient are the clearest mirrors I have ever looked into,” he says. “They show me myself in a way that nothing else can. They show me my deepest clinging, my aversions, and something else—an undying love.”

Mindfully staying in the moment also helps counselors, therapists, and caseworkers. As program director of the Women’s Wellness Project at the Garrison Institute, DaRa Williams teaches mindfulness to women who work with survivors of abuse. “If you’re working with people who have experienced trauma, you can experience vicarious trauma,” Williams explains. “As a result of empathetically connecting to clients, you are in a position to actually be traumatized yourself.” Mindfully staying in the present moment helps develop the ability to let go of pain—to let it flow in and out rather than be blocked by it. This doesn’t just benefit the caregiver or the therapist; it benefits the clients, too.

Education

Much of what’s wrong with our schools is simply what’s wrong with the world. It’s fast-paced and uncertain, and the violence



we’ve tried to keep outside our borders is erupting within them—in our neighborhoods, homes, and schools. This puts stress on children, which can affect their ability to learn. And stressed-out kids can develop into anxious adults with potentially long-term physical and emotional issues.

Can contemplative education help? Most of the research on the effects of mindfulness has been done on adults, but some recent studies indicate that children benefit from mindfulness in ways similar to grown-ups. One such study is currently being conducted by the Inner Resilience Program, which was established to help K-12 public school students in New York City deal with post-9/11 stress. Its director, Linda Lantieri, says that preliminary results suggest that “students who engage in mindfulness practices seem to experience reduced stress and acting-out behaviors and increased coping skills, as well as enhanced concentration and an increased sense that the classroom is a community.”

At this early stage, though, Lantieri’s most compelling evidence doesn’t come from a study but rather from her own extensive experience. Since 2001, she has been instrumental in sharing mindfulness with thousands of children, and they have become more skillful in quieting their minds, calming their bodies, and identifying and managing their emotions.

Likewise, David Forbes’ most compelling evidence comes from his own experiences. Forbes, the author of *Boyz 2 Buddhas*, specializes in working with youth at risk, a group he prefers to call “youth with problems.”

“I worked with an urban high school football team, which included some young men who tended to get in trouble both in and out of school,” he says. “We practiced mindfulness in group discussions and in brief, formal sessions of vipassana meditation. The mindfulness appeared to pay off. In one session, the group was able to face and work through racial tension between mem-



CAROLINA KROON



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NAROPA UNIVERSITY.

Clockwise from left: Body psychotherapy director Ryan Kennedy leading a psychology discussion at Naropa University; educational professionals discuss “Attention and Behavior” at the Garrison Institute’s Initiative on Contemplation and Education; seven-year-old Nai’im and his mother, Lynne Hurdle Price, practice muscle relaxation together at the Inner Resilience Program in New York City; students meditate at a ceremony marking the new academic year at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

bers. In another, the group helped a teammate involved in an altercation with a young woman to be more aware of his feelings and motivations. In individual sessions, some of the young men took a mindful approach that helped them deal with conflicts with a family member, girlfriend, or coach.”

Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence such as Lantieri’s and Forbes’—no matter how compelling—will not inspire large-scale adoption of contemplative education; more research is required to make that happen. For now, some smaller private institutions, including Montessori, Waldorf, and Quaker schools, continue their long-standing practice of contemplative education, and a small but growing number of educators in the public system are joining them.

Similarly, a growing number of professors at mainstream universities are weaving mindfulness into their classes, but only a few institutions have a culture of mindfulness across the board. Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, has perhaps most fully integrated contemplation into its curriculum. There, every class and meeting begins and ends with a bow.

President Tom Coburn says that when he was interviewed for the position six years ago, he fell so in love with the bow that he decided that even if he didn’t get the job, he was going to take the bow back with him to his home institution. “It’s a nonsectarian way of setting a contemplative context for any classroom activity,” he says. “It formalizes one’s intent to be present to other people.”

All BA freshmen at Naropa are required to take a course on contemplative practice. While there is no specific practice everybody participates in after that, all students do engage in an explicitly contemplative discipline, be it ikebana, tai chi, or yoga. Plus, all courses involve mindfulness even when they are in fields that at first glance don’t appear to be particularly contemplative, such as environmental studies or writing and literature.

“You can’t teach anything at Naropa that doesn’t have a contemplative dimension,” explains Coburn. “That’s not because there’s a police officer asking, ‘Where is the contemplative piece of your course?’ It’s just that contemplation is the air we breathe, the water we drink.”



Clockwise from above: Prisoners doing Vipassana meditation in a scene from *The Dhamma Brothers*; Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, Sensei, director of the National Buddhist Prison Sangha; meditators at Great Meadow Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in Comstock, New York, with instructors from the Prison Sangha.



Prisons

The more you become involved with the prison system, says Geoffrey Shugen Arnold, Sensei, the more you see how it permeates life in America. “We imprison more people than any other country in the world, and we imprison them for longer sentences,” he explains. “But inmates are not *other*. They are our neighbors.”

Shugen Sensei is director of the National Buddhist Prison Sangha (NBPS), an organization associated with Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York. This pioneering program got its start in 1984 when a number of inmates at a maximum-security prison in upstate New York wrote to John Daido Looi, Roshi and asked him to teach them meditation. Now one of the most extensive programs of its kind, NBPS offers assistance to inmates throughout the United States and Europe in prison settings ranging from maximum to minimum security, juvenile to military, and federal to local. The services it provides include an in-depth training program on meditation, ethics, and social interactions, as well as a correspondence program that pairs prisoners with Buddhists.

NBPS volunteers report that life behind bars looks like a magnified version of their own lives. In prison, the vicious cycles of samsara—the suffering caused by attachment, aggression, and ignorance—are just more concentrated. This is an eye-opener for the volunteers, but does developing mindfulness help prisoners?

“It can,” says Shugen Sensei, “just like it can help someone

who lives on Park Avenue. It depends on the person. It depends on how sincere they are.”

Lucia Meijer agrees. She is the president of the North American Vipassana Prison Trust (VPT), an arm of S.N. Goenka’s organization most famous for its work in India’s notorious Tihar jail in New Delhi. When, in the 1970s, VPT first introduced vipassana meditation to Tihar’s prisoners, it was considered one of the most dangerous penal institutions on Earth, with torture and murder standard fare for both inmates and staff. For twenty years, the prison authorities did not embrace vipassana. Then a new warden, Kiran Bedi, took over; she did embrace it and conditions improved remarkably.

The VPT now teaches vipassana to a thousand Tihar inmates at a time, and it instructs extensively in other prisons across the globe—in Israel, New Zealand, Mongolia, Taiwan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The acclaimed documentary *The Dhamma Brothers* tells the story of inmates in a maximum-security prison in Alabama who were transformed by studying vipassana with VPT.

The VPT offered meditation courses in a Washington State jail from 1997 to 2002, and a post-course follow-up conducted by the University of Washington showed “significant improvements in substance abuse and in certain psycho and social psychiatric measures, such as optimism and self-control,” Meijer says. Statistical and anecdotal evidence showing the efficacy of

mindfulness training to improve the conduct of inmates and to reduce recidivism has inspired a growing number of prison policy makers to embrace mindfulness training. But while mindfulness practiced on a wide scale could potentially reduce expenditures on corrections, more research is required to convince policy makers that meditation is a practical, rehabilitative option, rather than an inappropriate privilege for criminals.

Organizational Leadership

Colin Powell once said, “Endeavors succeed or fail because of the people involved. Only by attracting the best people will you accomplish great deeds.” But are these *best people* outside of ourselves, or can we accomplish great deeds by drawing the best out of ourselves, by drawing the best out of the team we already have? More and more leaders are saying that the best is within us, and that mindfulness is a powerful means to help us discover it.

How does mindfulness help us and our organizations perform better? Janice Marturano, who has been a vice president of General Mills for the past decade, explains it this way: “Leaders today are faced with global economies, time measured in Internet seconds, and a future that is increasingly interdependent—challenges that require leaders to use all of their capabilities, including the innate abilities of mindfulness. Yet, we are not usually taught to cultivate the brain’s ability to be present, to be focused, to be less reactive, to listen deeply.”

Marturano was introduced to mindfulness meditation five years ago and since then has spearheaded an effort to bring the practice to General Mills. To date, employees at all levels—including more than eighty vice presidents and directors—have participated in mindfulness programs ranging from a half-day to seven weeks. Those who have completed a multiday program are supported through a listserv, drop-in weekly meditation sessions, extended bimonthly sessions, and a multiday deepening session focused on communication and compassion.

General Mills’ human resources department does not offer or announce these programs. Instead, participants have been so moved by the impact of mindfulness training on their work that news of the programs has spread completely by word of mouth. One key factor contributing to the programs’ success is that they are secular. Indeed, most of the organizations and businesses that are successfully sharing mindfulness practices are doing so in a non-Buddhist context.

Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline* and director of the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL), says that SoL doesn’t link what it does to Buddhism because most people see Buddhism as a religion, and SoL isn’t a religious organization. It is, rather, a non-profit network dedicated to creating innovative ways of managing businesses. That said, one of the key concepts that SoL focuses on—how mind creates the world we perceive—could easily be referred to as Buddhism 101. Senge, however, generally refers to this concept as “mental models.”

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LEFT: BALCONY RELEASING, LTD. RIGHT: MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS ORDER NATIONAL BUDDHIST ARCHIVES



Right: A discussion among members of the Society for Organizational Learning; above: “How do we move from personal vision to shared vision?” asks a flow chart from a SoL meeting; above right: executive coach and mindfulness mediator Amy Fox leads a workshop.

Mindfulness

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“The idea is that human beings don’t in some objective fashion passively record an external reality,” says Senge. “When we interact with the world, we create an interpretation. If I see someone as a salesperson who just cares about making sales, I don’t say to myself, ‘This person said *that*, and as a result it got me to assume that this person only cares about making sales. That is my interpretation.’ Rather, what I say is, ‘This person doesn’t care about anything but making money,’ and I treat that as if it’s fact. We treat our thoughts as reality, but they’re a constructed and impermanent interpretation.”

What happens in an organization as a result? We don’t try to verify or adapt, and we may fail to fulfill our mission. This outcome, however, can be avoided through mindfulness practice, which leads us to an understanding of the workings of our own mind and an appreciation of the changing landscape around us, beyond our own interpretation.

Mindfulness doesn’t just have advantages for the bottom line, however. It brings alertness, relaxation, and a kind of contentment that makes work life more fulfilling and makes it easier for people to work together. According to executive coach and vipassana meditator Amy Fox, an organization that incorporates mindfulness enjoys psychological, spiritual, and emotional well-being. “Mindfulness,” she says, “creates acuity of presence, acuity of decision making, and acuity of collaboration.” ♦