



## Paradoxes of Mindfulness

Shauna Shapiro<sup>1</sup> · Ronald Siegel<sup>2</sup> · Kristin D. Neff<sup>3</sup>

Published online: 2 June 2018

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2018

### Abstract

This paper represents an attempt to highlight the paradoxes of mindfulness practice. Because mindfulness is a subtle form of awareness that does not stem from rational cognitive thought, its practice often involves embracing contradictions in a way that transcends logic. We first define mindfulness as involving three core aspects: intention, attention, and attitude. We then highlight four paradoxes of mindfulness that we believe to be especially salient for the field: (1) Acceptance vs. Change, (2) Escape vs. Engagement, (3) Effort vs. Non-Striving, (4) Self-Focus vs. Non-Self. Finally, we discuss the importance of ongoing dialog about these paradoxes both for practitioners and for those teaching mindfulness in clinical contexts.

**Keywords** Mindfulness · Paradox · Self-compassion · Acceptance · Change

Mindfulness is becoming widely used to decrease suffering and enhance personal growth. As mindfulness becomes mainstream, there is a danger that its subtleties and nuances may be missed. One major challenge inherent in mindfulness practice is the numerous paradoxes that are woven into its very essence. What exactly is a paradox? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true” (“Paradox | Definition of Paradox by Merriam-Webster,” [n.d.](#)). While the paradoxes inherent in mindfulness on first examination seem to be quite contradictory, as our practice deepens, these apparently opposing ideas turn out to either result from misunderstandings of mindfulness practice, to reflect dynamic tensions in the practice, or to indeed be simultaneously true. In this paper, we first define mindfulness, then discuss paradoxes within mindfulness practice, and finally consider implications for mindfulness practitioners and those teaching mindfulness in clinical contexts.

Mindfulness is inherently nonlinear and non-conceptual, thus trying to define and teach it using only the conceptual logical mind leaves significant gaps. Because

mindfulness helps us step out of our habitual narrative streams of thought, it is challenging to describe using words. Furthermore, since many of the insights that arise from mindfulness practice involve seeing the limitations of any particular point of view, these insights often seem paradoxical. The intention of this paper is to begin an inquiry and dialog into the paradoxes of mindfulness, realizing that we may raise more questions than we can answer. We are writing through the lens of clinical science as well as contemplative practitioners. Our deepest aspiration for this paper is that it be of benefit.

### Defining Mindfulness

Given that mindfulness is non-conceptual and nonlinear in nature, attempting to create a logical conceptual definition is challenging, to say the least. And yet, if we are to integrate mindfulness into science, medicine, education, and psychology, we need to have a coherent mutually agreed-upon definition. Although the concept of mindfulness is most often associated with Buddhism, its phenomenological nature is embedded in most religious and spiritual traditions, as well as in Western philosophical and psychological schools of thought (Walsh and Shapiro 2006). Mindfulness is a universal human capacity that transcends culture and religion. It is an inherent aspect of being human, a state of awareness accessible to all of us.

We define mindfulness as “the awareness that arises through intentionally attending in an open, caring, and

---

✉ Shauna Shapiro  
slishapiro@scu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, USA

<sup>2</sup> Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

<sup>3</sup> University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

discerning way” (Shapiro and Carlson 2017; p. 8.). This mindful awareness involves a *knowing* and *experiencing* of life as it arises and passes away each moment. It is a way of relating to all experience—positive, negative, and neutral—in an open, kind, and receptive manner. This awareness involves freedom from grasping and wanting anything to be different than it is. It simply *knows* what is truly occurring here and now, allowing us to see the nature of reality clearly and with compassion, without all of our conditioned patterns of perception clouding awareness.

Mindfulness does not necessarily change our experience; rather, it changes our relationship to what is occurring in the moment, adding the resonance of awareness to experience so we can know it deeply. By knowing our experience so intimately, we may begin to see how we cause ourselves suffering and begin to respond rather than react to painful experience. Ultimately, mindful awareness is about seeing things as they are so that we can respond consciously and skillfully in challenging circumstances.

Although mindful awareness is an ability inherent in everyone, it operates in contrast to our most basic survival instincts. The autonomic nervous system evolved to keep us safe from danger, so we can fight, flee, or freeze when we encounter danger, meaning that emotional reactivity is part of our biological nature (Kreibig 2010). Our reactive patterns are so ingrained that we may not realize we are engaging in them. We often live on automatic pilot, being pushed and pulled by these patterns, not fully awake, alive, and free to respond skillfully to the reality of the present moment. To counteract this reactive mode of being, we can train our mind in the ability to be with and know our experience as it arises and passes. This requires sustained practice, the intentional training of our mind to pay attention in a kind, discerning way. We call this training mindfulness practice.

In an attempt to elucidate both the simplicity and complexity of mindfulness, the first author developed a model of mindfulness comprised of three core elements: Intention, Attention, and Attitude (Shapiro et al. 2006). Intention, Attention, and Attitude (IAA) are not separate processes or stages—they are interwoven aspects of a single cyclic process and occur simultaneously, the three elements informing and feeding back into each other. Mindful practice *is* this moment-to-moment process.

*Intention* involves simply knowing why we are cultivating mindfulness, what is our aspiration, and motivation for practice. As Kabat-Zinn (1994) wrote, “Your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you from moment to moment of why you are practicing in the first place” (p. 32). He continued, “I used to think that meditation practice was so powerful ...that as long as you did it at all, you would see growth and change. But time has taught me that some kind of personal vision is also necessary” (Kabat-Zinn 1994, p. 46). Intentions are not outcome-based goals one actively strives

toward during each meditation practice. Instead, they are a direction, setting the compass of our heart in the direction we want to head.

A second fundamental component of mindfulness is *attention*. In the context of mindfulness practice, paying attention involves observing the operations of one’s internal and external experience. In this way, one learns to attend not only to the surrounding world but to the contents of one’s consciousness, moment by moment. Mindfulness practice involves a dynamic process of learning how to cultivate attention that is discerning and non-reactive, sustained, and concentrated, so that we can see clearly what is arising in the present moment (including our emotional reactions, if that is what comes up.) As Germer et al. (2005) noted, “An unstable mind is like an unstable camera; we get a fuzzy picture” (p. 16).

The final element, *attitude*, refers to the quality of our attention. According to Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is understood as an affectionate attention (Kabat-Zinn 1994). This attitudinal dimension of mindfulness, which involves a kind, open, discerning attitude, must be explicitly introduced as part of the practice. Attending without bringing the attitudinal qualities into the practice may result in practice that is condemning or judgmental of inner (or outer) experience. Such an approach may well have consequences contrary to the intentions of the practice, for example, cultivating patterns of judgment and striving instead of equanimity and acceptance.

The field of neuroplasticity demonstrates that our repeated experiences shape our brain. If we continually practice meditation with a cold, judgmental, and impatient attention, these tendencies will get stronger. Our intention instead is to practice with an attitude of open, caring attention. The attitudinal qualities do not add anything to the experience itself, but rather infuse the container of attention with acceptance, kindness, and curiosity. The attitudes are not an attempt to make things be a certain way; they are an attempt to relate to whatever *is* in a certain way (Kabat-Zinn 1994).

In sum, we offer the following integrative definition of mindfulness: *The awareness that arises when we intentionally pay attention in a kind, open discerning way.* And yet, even as we attempt to offer a rigorous, sensitive, and nuanced definition, we recognize that gaps arise because of the paradoxical nature of mindfulness practice. Below we highlight four paradoxes of mindfulness that we believe to be especially salient for the field: (1) Acceptance vs. Change, (2) Escape vs. Engagement, (3) Effort vs. Non-Striving, (4) Self-Focus vs. Non-Self.

### Acceptance vs. Change

Rogers (1961/1995) famously said, “The curious paradox of life is that when I can accept myself just as I am, then I can change.” (p. 17) This paradox of acceptance versus change is

one of the most salient paradoxes that arises when integrating mindfulness into Western medicine and psychology.

How do we talk about acceptance rather than seeking change within a context and culture that is focused, often exclusively, on outcomes? The majority of patients seek out mindfulness-based treatment because they are suffering, and very understandably, they want things to change. And yet, from a mindfulness perspective, accepting things as they are *is* the first step to change. Not surprisingly, this seeming contradiction is somewhat difficult to comprehend, especially for those in significant mental or physical pain. They do not want to simply accept and resign themselves to things as they are. They want change, and they want it as soon as possible.

Yet inherent in mindfulness practice is acceptance, allowing things to be as they are. What many people misunderstand is that acceptance doesn't mean we *want* things to be the way they are, it simply reflects that things *are* the way they are, so we might as well accept them instead of resisting what is. Bringing acceptance to the present moment does not mean that we willingly allow or endorse unnecessary suffering or unjust behavior. We accept and open to whatever is arising in the present, not because we necessarily like, condone, or encourage it, but because it is already happening. Then, from a place of clarity, we can consciously discern what is needed and respond in an appropriate and skillful way. Through this process of acceptance, we are able to see our situation realistically and respond in a conscious manner. Thus, paradoxically, acceptance is one of the essential elements that leads to transformation and change.

Practicing mindfulness, we come to realize that our suffering comes from wanting things to be different than they actually are. We crave certain experiences and we reject and push away others. We try to push or pull and force reality into being the way we want it to be. And even if for a moment we get it just right, just the way we want it, in the next moment things change. And so, we continue to resist and, hence, to suffer. Mindfulness both illuminates this suffering and is an antidote to it. Mindfulness is a way of being with *all* of our experience. It allows whatever arises to be here, which makes sense because it already *is* here.

When difficulty and adversity arise in our life, however, our automatic impulse is to resist it. Accepting it is the furthest thing from our mind. To try to feel safe we push away unpleasant experience, despite the fact that this only leads to more suffering. Mindfulness practice shows us that suffering is not invariably caused by what is happening, but emerges from our *relationship* to what is happening. It is our desire for things to be different than they are that causes suffering. When we resist painful experience and do not accept what is, we prolong our suffering. The saying “what we resist, persists” aptly describes this process.

Meditation teacher Shinzen Young (2017) offered a helpful description of how our resistance causes suffering. He

differentiated pain from suffering, suggesting that pain is the reality of what is happening, and is something that cannot be avoided, e.g., illness, loss, or traffic. Suffering is determined by our relationship to that reality. He offered a simple yet powerful equation:  $\text{Suffering} = \text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance}$  ( $S = P \times R$ ). The amount that we resist our pain determines how much we suffer. For example, if I am stuck in traffic I may become impatient and irritated, wanting the other cars to get out of my way. If we isolate the “pain” of waiting in traffic, for simplicity's sake we can assign it 10 units of pain. Isolating the “resistance” component, we may note that there are 20 units of resistance. The net suffering experienced is thus 200 units ( $10\text{pain} \times 20\text{resistance} = 200\text{suffering}$ )! When we resist our experience, we significantly increase our suffering. Shinzen Young aptly pointed out that from a mathematical perspective, anything multiplied by 0 is 0. Thus, if we have zero resistance to our pain we do not suffer. This does not mean we do not still experience pain, but it does mean we have some control over how much we suffer.

This teaching suggests a way of openly relating to experience instead of closing down and resisting it. It involves a radical acceptance of whatever is here, because it is already here. And yet, even if we buy into this perspective of acceptance, there still lies an essential contradiction—if mindfulness practice is about cultivating the capacity to accept the present moment exactly as it is, then the notion of a mindfulness *practice* or *training*, which implies progress toward a future goal, seems at odds with the very concept. Harris (2014) captured this elegantly:

We wouldn't attempt to meditate, or engage in any other contemplative practice, if we didn't feel that something about our experience needed to be improved. But here lies one of the central paradoxes of spiritual life, because this very feeling of dissatisfaction causes us to overlook the intrinsic freedom of consciousness in the present. As we have seen, there are good reasons to believe that adopting a practice like meditation can lead to positive changes in one's life. But the deepest goal of spirituality is freedom from the illusion of the self—and to *seek* such freedom, as though it were a future state to be attained through effort, is to reinforce the chains of one's apparent bondage in each moment. (p. 123)

The solution to the paradox, Harris (2014) suggested, is in approaching mindfulness not as a compulsively productive practice of self-improvement but as a capacity to engage with the present moment with clarity, intimacy, and grace. We are not trying to make anything happen; we trust the process to unfold naturally. We don't need to manufacture it or force it; we simply need to remember it. And thus begins the shift from self-improvement to self-liberation. There is the famous saying in Zen: “Seeking iron, he found gold,” reflecting the

reality that we are drawn to mindfulness practice hoping to make pain go away, or for stress-reduction, or to avoid relapsing into depression, and yet, what we learn from practice can evolve into something much more liberating and transformational.

### Escape vs. Engagement

Another of the great paradoxes of mindfulness practice—which is also a potential pitfall—is “Escape vs. Engagement.” Mindfulness practice can provide a sanctuary from the craziness of our lives. We take time out to close our eyes, become aware of our present-moment experience, and take a break from the ceaseless “doing” of normal day to day existence. Mindfulness practice offers us refuge from the constant barrage of challenging stimuli in the world. We finally have a few moments of peace. This is fine when approached as a needed respite, but ultimately, the intention of mindfulness is not to retreat from life but to participate with it more fully and intimately. If care is not taken, mindfulness practice can be used defensively as a way to shut off and close down to the responsibilities of life. Meditators may fall into the trap of withdrawing from the world, not taking action or being engaged in the significant challenges that our world faces, as a way to avoid reality. This is why we must refresh our aim, and remember our intention. The gift of nourishment and healing that comes from practice is ultimately in the service of helping us to develop new skills, perspectives, and neural pathways that equip us to re-enter the “world” and take action more effectively.

Similarly, mindfulness practice can be used defensively to short-circuit contact with emotional pain or bypass strong emotions. Focusing on the breath is so much more peaceful than focusing on anger or fear or grief. But the ultimate goal of mindfulness practice is equanimity. It is intended to awaken us from our automatic default way of being—which often involves tuning out or freaking out—and teach us how to relate to and embrace all of life: the joyful moments and the painful ones. Mindfulness helps us find a deep center and groundedness within ourselves amidst the emotional insanity. We learn to go within, to find a sanctuary from the chaos of the external world and our own reactivity. We are able to gain perspective on the chaos without detaching from it. So we must be careful to find the right balance of refuge from and contact with difficult emotions, so that we still remain engaged with our experience.

We like to think of mindfulness like a camera with a zoom and wide-angle lens. Sometimes, it is important to have a wide-angle lens, a “witness state of consciousness” which allows us to see with greater objectivity and distance. This lens brings much-needed perspective. However, it is equally important to have the zoom lens, to go right into our difficult

emotions, our painful body sensations, and learn to be intimately engaged with it all.

Thus, mindfulness practice serves two purposes: First, it provides us a sanctuary where we can rest and down-regulate our nervous systems, calm our minds, and recalibrate our emotions. From this centered place we are able to see the present moment clearly with wisdom and equanimity. Second, it provides us an environment in which to learn new tools and develop new neural pathways so that we return to the “real world” able to engage with less reactivity and greater clarity. Segal et al. (2009) offered an apt metaphor to illustrate this. They reflected that most of us have at some point been caught in a severe downpour of rain and have run for shelter. Sometimes we have simply been glad to be out of the rain while we stand under the shelter. We stand for a while hoping it will stop. But as the rain continues we know sooner or later we are going to have to face it. The thing we try to escape is still there. So, after a brief reprieve, we go back out in the rain, hunched over, cold, and wet just as we were before.

Mindfulness offers a different approach to the way we view the shelter. As we rest and heal in the shelter, we stay cognizant of the fact that at some point we are going to have to go back out into the rain. And so, while under the shelter, we cultivate new ways of facing the rain, for example, we may open an umbrella, so that when we walk back out into the rain, it is a completely different experience. The “umbrella” is similar to the new ways of being we learn during meditation. It is not simply a reprieve from the stress or “rain” of our lives; meditation offers a way of cultivating new perspectives and pathways. For example, we learn to open to experience instead of resisting it, and we learn to attend to the present instead of anxiously worrying about the future. These new neuropathways allow us to re-enter the rainstorm of life with a different attitude and new resources. Thus, the “return” from the sanctuary is a much different experience. As Einstein said, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

As another example, we can liken the chaos and challenges of life to waves in the ocean. Just like we cannot stop the stressors of life, we can’t stop the waves in the ocean. And yet, we can drop down beneath the surface waves, to the depths where the ocean is calmer. Mindfulness is the “scuba gear” required to reach those depths. While we rest in the depths, and enjoy a reprieve from the pounding waves at the surface, we are also strengthening and renewing, learning to be with the truth of what is, to feel our emotions (even the painful ones), and to see clearly with honesty and courage. Focused attention or concentration practices, as well as equanimity practices such as the Mountain Meditation, can all help support rejuvenation by temporarily turning our attention away from stormy emotions and interpersonal engagements.

Alternatively, of course, we can learn to surf. This involves feeling all of the waves quite fully, but having the confidence



that we can work with them skillfully. Open monitoring practices in which we choose the ever-changing somatic dimensions of emotions as the object of our attention help us to fully feel painful states without becoming overly reactive to them. Some mindfulness practices help us drop below the surface; while others help us to surf. But none of them are designed to stop the waves. Mindfulness is not about escaping from life, it is about learning to engage with it fully, to dive or surf with the inevitable waves. So while we withdraw temporarily from the tumult of life, we do so in order to develop the capacities to engage more fully with greater equanimity.

### Effort vs. Non-Striving

There is another common paradox which virtually every mindfulness student encounters early in their practice, and it often causes a lot of confusion. Practice usually begins with cultivating concentration, or “focused attention.” This involves picking an object of attention, such as the breath or other sensations, and trying to follow it closely. Every time the mind wanders away from that object, we’re told to gently return our attention to it.

Before long, most new students run into trouble and report, “this isn’t working—I can’t get my thoughts to stop.” To which the teacher replies, “that’s OK, we’re not trying to get the thoughts to stop—just whenever the mind wanders, gently return it to the object of attention. Allow thoughts, images, and other mental contents to come and go.” Here the student typically becomes puzzled. How can we simultaneously allow what arises to arise—not strive to cultivate a particular state of mind—while trying to focus the mind on a particular object of attention? Doesn’t that take effort?

This paradox only deepens as our practice matures. In many Buddhist traditions, for example, we’re taught that the aim of the practice is to cultivate “wholesome” states of mind, such as generosity, kindness, compassion, and wisdom; while trying not to reinforce “unwholesome” states, such as greed, anger, delusion, and ignorance. But we’re also taught the opposite—simply to be with, and accept, whatever arises in consciousness. Doesn’t cultivation require effort?

Ultimately, this paradox of simultaneously exerting effort while not striving gets to the heart of suffering. As mentioned earlier, we usually come to see at some point in our mindfulness practice that all suffering arises from *desire*—the wish that things be other than as they are, or that they remain as they are and not change. This is why non-striving, or not pursuing desires, is such an important aspect of practice. But how is it possible to put effort into our mindfulness practice without striving?

This tension between effort and non-striving is closely related to the paradox we discussed earlier of *acceptance* vs. *change*. It requires us to bring an unusual sort of energy or attitude to our mindfulness practice, and to psychological or

spiritual development more generally. Typically, when we exert effort in our lives, it’s toward some goal. We work out at the gym to develop strength, endurance, and flexibility. Yet many of the spiritual traditions from which mindfulness practices derive specifically eschew a goal orientation in the mental gym of meditation. In fact, the developmental or spiritual path is described as a *journey without goal*.

Most of our typical, not-so-mindful states of mind vacillate between two poles: anxious, goal-oriented activity in which we pursue pleasure and try to avoid pain; and spacing out or wandering off. A third orientation is possible, and the paradox we’re exploring leads us toward it: alert, relaxed attention (which requires effort to develop) without pursuing any specific goal. But this attitude is often elusive.

In Buddhist traditions, several instructions are offered to help students develop this attitude of simultaneous effort and non-striving. Some are playful, such as the Zen Master who suggested, “You’re perfect just the way you are—and there’s room for improvement.” Other teachings call for balance, for finding a “middle way” between effort and non-striving. The Buddha suggested the image of tuning a lute. He said that if you make the strings too tight, they can break; too loose, and you can’t get any sound (“Sona Sutta: About Sona,” n.d.).

This last metaphor suggests that finding our way with the practice will be an iterative process, requiring regular adjustments. Sometimes we’ll try too hard to pay attention, or to be alert, and find that it backfires, increasing our suffering. It becomes like trying to fall asleep during a bout of insomnia, or trying to relax when frightened—our very effort creates a state of agitation that makes matters worse. Other times we may be too lackadaisical, and become spacy, sleepy, or just get lost in our thought stream.

Another useful image comes from the story of a Zen Master who invited a senior student to sit by his side as he conducted interviews with other students. At the end of the day, the senior student was confused, and disillusioned. He said to his teacher, “I’ve always thought that you were very wise, but now I’m not so sure. As I listened to your interviews, I heard you give completely contradictory advice to different students.” The master said to him, “I understand that it might’ve sounded like that. But from where I sit, I see a road. And when one student starts to veer off into a ditch on the left, I yell, ‘go right, go right.’ When another student veers off into a ditch on the right, I yell, ‘go left, go left.’ It only seems contradictory if you don’t see the road.” Usually, in mindfulness practice, we get to see the road only by falling first into one ditch and then into the other—sometimes getting too goal-oriented in our practice, other times not applying ourselves sufficiently.

The paradox of effort vs. non-striving can be seen perhaps most clearly during intensive retreat practice. Typically states of increased concentration will develop, and they can be very appealing. We taste our food more fully, notice nature, take

our thoughts less seriously, and savor the present moment. Enjoying this state, we concentrate harder, putting in more effort in an attempt to reinforce or deepen the absorption that feels so good, so sane, so right—until something shifts, and a difficult emotion arises, or our thoughts become more critical. In response, we may try even harder to concentrate, struggling to return to our earlier blissful state. This then compounds our difficulty, since our very struggle feeds the agitated state that we're finding to be so unpleasant.

Many years ago, Joseph Goldstein, a pioneering mindfulness teacher, told a story of a silent individual retreat he undertook in Asia. He said that the first six months were blissful—concentrated, relaxed, full of wisdom and compassion, feeling one with the universe. He needed to interrupt his retreat to return to America for some family business, but was eager to continue his intensive practice. When he got back to Asia, he said that the next six months were like “twisted steel.” Everything felt wrong—his mind was continually agitated and dissatisfied. It took him a full six months to realize that the point of the practice wasn't to arrive at a particular concentrated, blissful state, but rather to open to whatever is happening. When he finally got this—and stopped trying so hard to experience bliss again—his mind-states began to transform.

So trying too hard to achieve a particular state of mind is definitely one of the ditches we can fall into—and when we land there, it's time to lighten up. But on the other hand, without some effort, there is no mindfulness practice. We simply live in our thought stream, believing in all of our ideas and perceptions, addictively trying to pursue pleasure and avoid pain—getting stuck in the other ditch. Indeed, sometimes it takes a great deal of effort to have the patience to be with restlessness, agitation, boredom and the other mental contents we may notice when we're more mindful. In the short run, it's almost always more pleasant to turn on the TV, go to the fridge, or check our smartphone. We therefore need both effort and non-striving.

Finding our way between the two ditches is particularly challenging when dealing with emotions—especially the “unwholesome” ones such as anger mentioned above. On the one hand, it's true that because of experience-dependent neuroplasticity, any emotion or state of mind that we practice or rehearse will tend to arise more readily in the future. So if we spend a lot of time being angry, bigoted, judgmental, and self-centered, those traits will be reinforced.

But on the other hand, there's the problem that “what we resist, persists.” And a close corollary, as one of our patients put it, “When we bury feelings we bury them alive.” So avoiding, suppressing, or repressing negative or painful emotions can make matters worse. The feelings live on, and create all sorts of problems. We may experience anxiety or stress as we fight to keep emotions out of awareness, or find ourselves acting them out automatically and unconsciously.

Our effort therefore becomes not so much trying to get rid of “unwholesome” feelings and impulses, but rather to experience and acknowledge them, as we try to skillfully decide how in each moment to work with them. Similarly, in cultivating wholesome responses such as generosity, kindness, compassion, and wisdom, we also need a balanced effort, since trying to manufacture these when they're not readily arising only results in a “spiritual bypass”—avoiding painful feelings by fooling ourselves and others into thinking that we're saints.

We should note that Buddhist texts include “right effort” as one of the components of the “Eight-Fold Path” to enlightenment. In the classical texts, this is defined somewhat differently than we're discussing it here. “Right effort” involves trying to cultivate and maintain “wholesome” states and to keep “unwholesome” states from arising or extinguish them if they have arisen (“Right Effort: Samma Vayama,” n.d.) What isn't immediately apparent in some of these texts is the paradox we're highlighting here—the ways in which such efforts can readily backfire if not simultaneously balanced with non-striving.

Many Buddhist traditions also don't emphasize another difficulty: how trying too hard can turn mindfulness practice into an aversive chore. When we place too much emphasis on controlling the mind, or developing wholesome attitudes, we wind up feeling like bad meditators or failures, and may well abandon the practice. Finding a middle way between effort and non-striving, that includes kindness toward ourselves as we stumble from one ditch to the other, can help with this as well. In fact, researchers have found that giving participants brief instructions to be warm and compassionate to themselves prior to a mindfulness meditation session made them more willing to continue the training (Rowe et al. 2016), suggesting that supporting oneself as one learns the difficult skill of mindfulness helps prevent people from becoming discouraged and giving up.

### Self-Focus vs. Non-self

The final paradox we would like to consider centers on the role of the self in practice. At first glance, mindfulness practice appears to be very self-focused. After all, we're spending considerable time apparently not doing anything productive or helpful to others. We're attending to sensations in our bodies, and observing the reactions of our minds to various stimuli and events, all seemingly part a self-improvement project.

Yet one of the fruits of mindfulness practices in Buddhist traditions is said to be seeing through the illusion of a separate self—seeing what is called in Pali, the language in which the teachings of the historical Buddha were first recorded, *anatta*, or non-self. Furthermore, as we experience this insight, we're expected to become much less self-preoccupied, even selfless. In fact, it's even been shown empirically that mindfulness

training leads us to act more altruistically toward others (Condon et al. 2013).

How can attending carefully to our experiences bring us to see that there's no substantial, stable, separate self? One of the first insights we get in practice is that our mind is continuously generating thoughts. In fact, much of our daily consciousness involves inner chatter which generally features “me” at its center. From mundane decisions (“Should I get dessert?”) to existential concerns (“How many good years do I have left?”), thoughts fill our waking hours. Listening to this day after day, we naturally come to believe that the hero of this drama must exist, and must be very important. As Descartes put it, “I think therefore I am.”

Neuroscientists are beginning to localize the brain activity associated with thinking about ourselves. Much of it occurs in the *default mode network* (DMN), a series of midline structures that are active when we're not deliberately focused on a goal-oriented task (Buckner et al. 2008). When regions of the DMN are activated, we're often thinking about our qualities, judging ourselves, or comparing ourselves to others. In the process, we create a sense of separate self, projecting it into the past and future.

It makes sense that our brains would have evolved to use quiet, non-goal-oriented moments to reappraise our situation, review past accomplishments and errors, identify threats, and plan for the future. This activity has been essential for human survival, given our lack of big teeth, sharp claws, tough hides, or speedy legs. But unfortunately, these processes also contribute to solidifying our feeling of being an autonomous “I,” which albeit useful for survival, causes a great deal of psychological distress.

One of the benefits of mindfulness practice is that it reduces DMN activity, both on and off the cushion (Brewer et al. 2013). When experienced meditators (with over 1000 h of practice) and beginners were placed in a fMRI scanner and told to simply rest, the DMN of experienced practitioners was less tightly organized than in beginners, an indication that there was still some mindful awareness even as the mind wandered (Taylor et al. 2013).

Experientially, as the DMN quiets, we come to identify less with our thoughts about ourselves—both the evaluative narratives in which we judge ourselves to be good or bad, or successes or failures; as well as our strategic thoughts about how to maximize pleasure and avoid pain.

How might mindfulness practice accomplish this reduction in DMN activity, simultaneously helping us to unravel our conventional sense of self? By repeatedly bringing attention to our breath or another sensory experience in the present moment, we begin to see consciousness as a changing kaleidoscope of sensations and images, regularly narrated by our thoughts, which themselves arise and pass. Our attention shifts from the breath, to a sound, to an itch, to a future fantasy, to recalling an upsetting email. Amidst all of this activity, we

never actually find the mythical homunculus, the heroic little man or woman inside who is “having” an experience. We don't find the stable, coherent, separate “I” so regularly mentioned in our passing thoughts. Instead, we find a continual flux of changing mental contents. As Epstein (2013) put it succinctly, we discover “thoughts without a thinker.”

This insight has many benefits, all of which lead us toward less self-focused action in the world. One of these arises from seeing the contents of our mind as impersonal events arising in awareness, rather than as “my” thoughts and feelings.

Let's say that our friend, to whom we feel we've been extraordinarily generous, does something to hurt our feelings. In our typically non-mindful, automatically reactive state, we'd think “I can't believe you did that to me after all I've done for you.” This will be accompanied by a rush of angry sensations in the body, which in turn will reinforce the thought, which will then generate more angry sensations. The cycle could go on for days.

But if we've come to see the insubstantial nature of the self, we'll notice the anger arising as just another mental object, with accompanying bodily sensations. We'll feel the breath quicken, and the shoulders tighten, and observe hostile thoughts arising and passing. But by seeing it all as the impersonal process it is, we may not believe so much in the story about “me.” We may come to see our consciousness more, as the neurobiologist Singer (2005) described the brain, as “an orchestra without a conductor” (page number?). Experiencing our consciousness this way, as an impersonal process with sensations, thoughts, and feelings unfolding moment after moment, allows us space to not react so automatically and defensively. And this in turn allows us to consider other people's perspectives, and to be less defensive.

Another useful insight that comes from mindfulness practice involves noticing that our sense of self is ever-changing. As we observe carefully, we notice that our personality seems to be made up of various parts, each of which takes precedence at different moments.

We humans have noticed this since ancient times. It may explain why polytheism, not monotheism, has been the norm historically. The ancient Greeks and Romans had their pantheons of gods, each one representing a different aspect of the personality. Varied Catholic saints, Tibetan bodhisattvas, and spirits in animistic cultures worldwide all are representations of the different “selves” that seem to run the show at different moments.

Indeed, it doesn't take a great deal of mindfulness to notice that that angry “me” is very different from loving “me,” frightened “me,” jealous “me,” or sad “me.” We just need to ask our romantic partners or family members—they can attest to our different selves! We might therefore think of ourselves as made up of many parts. Indeed, many psychotherapeutic systems have suggested this. Freud had the ego, id, and superego; Jung the animus, anima, shadow, and persona;

and more recently, Schwartz (2013) developed the Internal Family Systems model, which works to help our various parts to cooperate with one another.

Through mindfulness practice, we can see these different parts more clearly, and notice when one or the other is triggered, or takes over consciousness. We also become less attached to particular narratives about who we are. For example, if we like to think of ourselves as generous, hard-working, and intelligent, we may become quite upset or defensive when our greedy, lazy, or not so intelligent parts come to the fore. In fact, most of us to some degree dissociate from the parts of us we don't like. We may resist or deny our vulnerability, our aggression, or our lust. If, on the other hand, we come to see that there really is no stable, coherent, separate self to be found, we can be much more comfortable with all the different parts of our personalities. This means that we do not have to prop up and defend our favorite part, and we can be less focused on our self-image or social standing. It allows us to be more honest in our self-assessments, and more honest with others about our shortcomings. With nothing to defend, we're better able to respond to new situations flexibly, with the interests of others, as well as ourselves, in mind. As one Zen master put it, "The boundary of what we can accept in ourselves is the boundary of our freedom."

Perhaps the most radical implication of grasping anatta is that we no longer need to devote our energies so relentlessly to enhancing our personal pleasure and avoiding our personal pain. As we start to see pleasant and unpleasant experiences as impersonal mental contents, we feel less compelled to hold onto the one while pushing away the other. We see that clinging to pleasure and resisting pain multiplies our miseries ( $\text{Suffering} = \text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance}$ ), and become less driven to do it.

How might this transformation occur? When our attention is largely focused on narratives about ourselves, it's natural that the comfort and pleasure of the hero of our story becomes very important. Just as it's difficult to convince a young child that enduring pain might be a sensible idea in the service of a greater good, when we're thinking about ourselves, we naturally resist discomfort. As we practice opening with acceptance to present experience, and see it increasingly as a kaleidoscope of changing impersonal mental contents (rather than being lost in thoughts about how to improve "my" experience), resistance to pain naturally diminishes.

We can see this shift in attitude repeatedly during mindfulness meditation practice. Let's say that the discomfort of an itch or an ache arises. If we're in our typical thought stream, with our Default Mode Network activated, we're thinking about ourselves and strategizing how to maximize future pleasure and avoid future pain. In this state, as soon as discomfort appears, we instinctively move to scratch the itch or alleviate the ache because our whole orientation is, "How do I help myself to feel good and not to feel bad?"

As we begin to have more glimpses into anatta, notice our narratives about ourselves as narratives, and experience the changing kaleidoscope of sensory experience more dispassionately—we feel less compelled to adjust circumstances to gratify "our" desires. Instead, we become better able to *be with* discomfort and pleasure as impersonal events that arise and pass.

So, while mindfulness practices may indeed appear to be very self-focused, in the process of attending carefully to our experience, we paradoxically find that "no one's home." Rather, we discover ourselves to be ever-changing organisms experiencing a continuous flow of mental contents arising and passing. And the more clearly we see this, the less preoccupied with our "self" we become.

## Implications for Practice and Teaching

As mindfulness becomes mainstream, it becomes important that this breadth of reach does not dilute our depth of understanding. The rush to secularize and commodify mindfulness into an accessible (and marketable) technique risks denaturing its essence and losing its transformational potential.

A major challenge inherent in understanding and practicing mindfulness is the numerous paradoxes that are woven into its very essence. We believe that by explicitly embracing the paradoxes of mindfulness, we are able to transcend some of dualistic thinking that often stands in the way of transformation and healing.

Without this understanding, the oversimplification of mindfulness can have unintended unfortunate consequences. First, mindfulness can be unskillfully used as a means to escape reality and to distance ourselves from life instead of as a means to live more fully with greater intimacy and authenticity. Second, we can unskillfully use the mindfulness practices as a way to push ourselves harder, to strive and to perfect ourselves, instead of recognizing the inherent paradox of acceptance within change. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the oversimplification of mindfulness can cause us to miss the potential of mindfulness practices to provide insight into the non-dual nature of reality and a deeper understanding of interconnectedness. We believe that this capacity to shift perspective out of the egocentric individual frame of reference to a deeper understanding of the nature of reality as an interconnected, interdependent whole is a key to the radical transformational power of mindfulness.

As we become more comfortable with paradoxes we are able to acknowledge that so many ideas are true, *and* so are their opposites. We see that change can come through acceptance and surrendering the project of changing things; that taking temporary refuge from challenges can help us to better engage with them; that it requires effort to let go of striving;



and that by exploring ourselves we can actually become less self-focused.

Without these insights, it is easy to get stuck in one polarity or another. These include excessive effort to change mental contents; insufficient effort to cultivate wholesome states; using mindfulness practices as a spiritual bypass to avoid pain; overwhelming ourselves with too much pain; using the practices to escape from interpersonal engagement; and becoming self-focused, missing the potential of the practices to transcend self-preoccupation. If we clinicians and teachers can open to and understand these paradoxes, we will be less likely to stumble into these pitfalls, and be better able to guide our clients or students to do the same.

The intention of this paper is to raise these questions as part of a larger ongoing conversation that begins with noticing when we ourselves, or those with whom we work, are getting stuck in one pole of a paradox. Our hope is that this continued reflection and dialog will deepen our understanding of mindfulness, in all its multifaceted complexities and richness.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflicts of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Human Participants and Animal Studies** There was no research involving human participants and/or animals.

**Informed Consent** There was no informed consent.

## References

- Brewer, J. A., Garrison, K. A., & Whitfield-Gabrieli, S. (2013). What about the “self” is processed in the posterior cingulate cortex? *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00647>.
- Buckner, R. L., Andrews-Hanna, J. R., & Schacter, D. L. (2008). The brain’s default network. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1124*(1), 1–38.
- Condon, P., Desbordes, G., Miller, W. B., & DeSteno, D. (2013). Meditation increases compassionate responses to suffering. *Psychological Science*, *24*(10), 2125–2127.
- Epstein, M. (2013). *Thoughts without a thinker*. New York: Basic Books.
- Germer, C. K., Siegel, R. D., & Fulton, P. R. (2005). *Mindfulness & Psychotherapy*. Guilford Press, NY, NY.
- Harris, S. (2014). *Waking up: a guide to spirituality without religion*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion
- Kreibig, S. D. (2010). Autonomic nervous system activity in emotion: a review. *Biological Psychology*, *84*(3), 394–421.
- Paradox | Definition of Paradox by Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Retrieved November 5, 2017, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradox>
- Right Effort: Samma Vayama. (n.d.). Retrieved November 5, 2017, from <http://www.vipassana.com/resources/8fp5.php>
- Rogers, C. (1961/1995). *On becoming a person: a therapist’s view of psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rowe, A. C., Shepstone, L., Camelley, K. B., Cavanagh, K., & Millings, A. (2016). Attachment security and self-compassion priming increase the likelihood that first-time engagers in mindfulness meditation will continue with mindfulness training. *Mindfulness*, *7*(3), 642–650.
- Schwartz, R. C. (2013). Moving from acceptance toward transformation with internal family systems therapy (IFS). *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *69*(8), 805–816. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22016>.
- Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M. G., and Teasdale, J. D. (2009). *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*, First Edition: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse, Guilford Publications. NY, NY.
- Shapiro, S. L. & Carlson, L. E. (2017). *The art and science of mindfulness: Integrating mindfulness into psychology and the helping professions*. Washington, DC: American Psychology Press.
- Shapiro, S. L., Carlson, L., Astin J., & Freedman, B. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *62*(3), 373–386.
- Singer, W. (2005). *Paper presented at the Mind and Life Institute conference*. Washington, DC.
- Sona Sutta: About Sona. (n.d.). Retrieved November 5, 2017, from <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.055.than.html>
- Taylor, V. A., Daneault, V., Grant, J., Scavone, G., Breton, E., Roffe-Vidal, S., et al. (2013). Impact of meditation training on the default mode network during a restful state. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, *8*(1), 4–14.
- Walsh, R., & Shapiro, S. L. (2006). The meeting of meditative disciplines and western psychology: A mutually enriching dialogue. *American Psychologist*, *61*(3), 227–239.
- Young, S. (2017). Break through pain. Retrieved from <http://shinzen.org/Articles/artPain.htm>. Accessed 6 June 2017.