Mindfulness
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MINDFULNESS IN PRACTICE

Practical Recommendations for Teaching Mindfulness Effectively

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We never cease to be amazed by how popular mindfulness is becoming and by the number of individuals wishing to train as mindfulness teachers. The explanations people provide for wanting to become mindfulness teachers are numerous and wide-ranging but the most common reasons we have come across are spiritual development, personal development, professional development and/or financial gain. Personally, we would like to see the integration of mindfulness into applied settings unfold at a much slower pace and for a greater number of mindfulness stakeholders to appreciate the importance of developing strong practice foundations. We would also like to see people teach mindfulness only after many years of tuition and focussed daily practice. However, given the level of public interest and the growing demand for mindfulness teachers, such an approach is probably not realistic and so perhaps the next best thing to do is to try to raise awareness of the factors that—whether according to traditional Buddhist thinking or contemporary research findings—are deemed to facilitate effective and authentic mindfulness teaching. Accordingly, here we outline what we believe are ten practical recommendations for teaching mindfulness effectively.

1. *Practice what you teach*: In these modern times, it seems as though it is becoming increasingly acceptable for people to be appointed as teachers of subjects or skills that they have not actually mastered themselves. For example, some of the very kind people that make part of our meditation community (i.e. Sangha) are keen for us to remain up to date with technology. Therefore, in recent years, we have received training in how to use all kinds of impressive devices such as smartphones, satnavs and ipads, and we have a long list of helpline numbers to call when things go wrong. Admittedly, we are not the most technically minded of people and a lot of the issues we encounter when using modern technology are probably due to our own mistakes. Nevertheless, something that continues to amaze us when we telephone for technical assistance is that the person on the other end of the phone invariably has not been trained on how to use the device in question and more often than not they attempt to resolve the issue by simply reading from a problem-solving checklist in a manual. Perhaps in certain walks of life, it is acceptable to go about things in this manner, but this approach certainly does not work when it comes to teaching mindfulness. Indeed, if we are going to call ourselves mindfulness teachers, then it is imperative that we follow a personal practice of mindfulness so that we can impart to others an experiential understanding of the principles of present moment awareness.

   In the traditional Buddhist setting, although meditation practitioners would study the relevant sutras and teachings on mindfulness, the primary means of helping others to enter the path of mindful living was for the meditation teacher to simply practice mindfulness during all of their actions. In other words, rather than reading from scriptures or manuals, and rather than providing individuals with copious amounts of theory and information about mindfulness, the most effective way to teach mindfulness is for the mindfulness teacher to lead by example. By practising full awareness of their thoughts, words and deeds, mindfulness teachers create an atmosphere of calm and spiritual presence and this helps participants to relax and to connect with their own capacity for being awake to the present moment.

   Recently, research has been conducted that suggests that there is actually a lot of wisdom behind this

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traditional method of teaching mindfulness. Rather than measure outcomes in the participants that actually receive mindfulness training, the studies we are referring to have measured outcomes in the non-meditating family members and individuals around them (Singh et al. 2013, 2014). Preliminary findings suggest that, to a certain extent, mindfulness can actually be 'contagious' and that just by being in the presence of mindfulness practitioners, individuals experience greater levels of wellbeing and consciously or sub-consciously start to become increasingly aware of how to behave in a more psychosocially adaptive manner.

2. *Practice when you teach*: Practising mindfulness when you teach relates closely to the above point of *practising what you teach*, but it has a slightly different meaning. Whilst it is very important that mindfulness teachers do their best to practice mindfulness throughout all of their daily activates, it is likewise essential that they practice when they are actually in front of a group of students or participants. Therefore, before instructing a class or giving a talk on mindfulness, it is very important to take some time to centre the mind and to re-establish oneself in the present moment. If you are a Buddhist practitioner, then you might also like to use this time to call upon the blessings of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and to ask for their guidance and support. Alternatively, if your interest in mindfulness is secular in nature, then it is still a good idea to engender compassionate thoughts before you stand or sit in front of a group of participants. Preparing the mind in this manner will help you to cultivate the right intention for your mindfulness teaching which is to guide others towards wellbeing, peace and spiritual awareness.

   This right intention also helps us to understand that as mindfulness teachers, we might be the person's first 'official' contact with the Dharma (i.e. the spiritual teachings) and, as such, we have a tremendous responsibility to think, speak and act with wisdom and compassion. Indeed, when we are teaching mindfulness, we should make sure that the first person who hears what is uttered from our mouths is ourselves. Encountering a mindfulness or meditation teacher that likes the sound of their own voice or who does not practice their own teachings can create a bad impression and deter people from venturing further along the path. However, by practising full awareness of our speech, we avoid the trap of making the mindfulness teaching session all about ourselves and we ensure that the atmosphere remains fresh, open and conducive to meditative growth.
3. *Do not be too mindful*: Although, as stated above, it is imperative that as mindfulness teachers we maintain a regular (or ideally a continuous) practice of mindfulness, it is important that we do not try too hard and are natural in the way we practice being in the here and now. There is nothing worse than a mindfulness teacher who goes to great lengths to master the art of appearing to be mindful but who does not actually have any presence of mind. In our opinion, some tell-tale signs that a teacher has not really embodied the basic principles of mindfulness are as follows: (i) an overly-pious demeanour, (ii) constant/inappropriate smiling, (iii) not being able to introduce joy and light-heartedness into their teachings and (iv) doing things excessively slowly when others are watching but rushing around mindlessly at other times.
4. *Leave the ego outside*: A few years ago, we were giving some talks in Italy and at the entrance to one of the meditation halls that we visited was displayed the following message: '*Lasciate le scarpe e l'ego all'esterno per favour*'. It translates from Italian as '*please leave shoes and ego outside*'. We thought this was an excellent message because more than anything else, the biggest factor that causes mindfulness practitioners and teachers to err in their practice is not keeping the ego in its place. As we have discussed in previous *Mindfulness in Practice* articles, Buddhism asserts that ego—or attachment to the self—is basically the root cause of suffering and that a bolstered ego and meditative awakening are two things that cannot go hand in hand. For mindfulness teachers—particularly those that become very popular—there is always the danger that they start believing they are doing the world a tremendous service and/or start to think of themselves as some kind of guru. In fact, you would probably be surprised at just how many meditation teachers we know that had very pure intentions when they first started, but who have been corrupted by the slightest bit of fame or success.

   The above is an obvious example of how the ego can cause a mindfulness teacher to become caught up in themselves and to distance themselves from the authentic Dharma. However, the ego is very tricky and multi-layered and so even for mindfulness teachers that do not become famous, there is still always the risk that their ego might get the better of them. For example, even thinking as mindfulness teachers that we are doing really well because we are being very spiritual and not letting our ego get in the way might actually be an example of how the ego is deceiving us. Thus, as mindfulness instructors, we should make every effort to remain humble at all times and ensure that when we take our shoes off and leave them outside the meditation hall, we leave our ego with them.
5. *Be clear about your role*: Currently, people are teaching mindfulness from lots of different backgrounds and for lots of different purposes. To give just a few examples, there are clinicians that teach mindfulness as a treatment for psychopathology, there are school teachers that teach

mindfulness to foster healthy learning environments and there are spiritual teachers that teach mindfulness to facilitate transpersonal growth. However, something that we occasionally observe is that mindfulness teachers are not always clear about their role and participants can become confused about whether they are receiving a psychotherapeutic intervention or Dharma teachings. Mindfulness is an introspective process and even when it is taught in clinical contexts, it often brings people into contact with their more 'subtle self'. Therefore, participants or patients referred to receive mindfulness training in order to overcome a specific issue such as stress, depression or addiction may end up asking questions of the mindfulness teacher that are explicitly spiritual in nature. This scenario can put mindfulness teachers in a difficult situation—especially if their mindfulness training was explicitly clinically focussed. However, it is our view that mindfulness teachers should avoid feeling that they need to have an answer for everything and from the very start, they should be absolutely clear (with themselves and with their students/patients) about their role.

The same applies for spiritual teachers that are asked questions relating to issues of a clinical or medical nature—being honest with participants by avoiding trying to have an answer for everything helps to build trust and makes for a healthy learning and practice environment. In fact, consistent with the traditional Buddhist approach to teaching mindfulness, the teacher-student relationship should be one where both parties are open to learning from each other and where the teacher always strives to have a 'beginners mind' (i.e. a mind that remains completely open so that it can experience everything as fresh and as an opportunity for acquiring wisdom).

6. *Familiarise yourself with the core teachings*: Irrespective of whether a mindfulness instructor is following a secular or Buddhist approach to teaching mindfulness, we would advise all mindfulness teachers to familiarise themselves with at least the core Buddhist teachings on mindfulness. By reading suttas such as the *ānāpānasati sutta*, *satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (and/or the *mahasatipaṭṭhāna sutta*), and the *kāyagatāsati sutta*, and by becoming familiar with general Buddhist teachings such as the *Four Noble Truths*, *Noble Eight Fold Path*, *Four Immeasurable Attitudes* and *Three Dharma Seals*, the mindfulness teacher can develop a much deeper understanding of the principles of present moment awareness and of the original context in which mindfulness was taught. Depending on the particular setting, it might not be appropriate to directly refer to these teachings when instructing others, but being appraised of their contents will certainly help mindfulness teachers to feel much more confident and to provide a more authentic teaching experience.
7. *Focus on the basics*: Inevitably, there will always be some people wishing to learn mindfulness that associate meditation with mystical experiences and who think that just by turning up to a few practice sessions, they are going to experience some kind of sudden awakening. Of course, it is definitely possible that some highly adept meditation teachers can actually encompass the student's mind with their own mind and cause the student to experience a specific meditative realisation. However, in our experience, it is much better to keep things down to earth and to steer participants away from hoping for quick-win or mystical solutions to their problems. Indeed, the only way to become adept at practising mindfulness is to start at the beginning and build strong practice foundations.

   Therefore, wherever possible, mindfulness teachers should ensure that participants finish their training with a firmly-embedded understanding of (at least) the following core mindfulness principles and techniques: (i) correct breathing and using the breath as a meditative anchor, (ii) the importance of practising mindfulness beyond formal meditation settings (including how to practice walking meditation, working meditation and eating meditation), (iii) gentleness in thoughts, words and actions, (iv) making use of mindfulness reminders such as an hour chime or a simple acronym (e.g. SOS—stop, observe the breath, step back and watch the mind), (v) correct posture for sitting meditation (whether for sitting on the floor or on a chair), (vi) using mindfulness to relax the body (e.g. via a 'body scan'), (vii) mindfulness of feelings and thoughts (including how to act rather than react to internal and external stimuli) and (viii) a basic grasp of concepts such as (a) interconnectedness, (b) impermanence, (c) compassion and loving-kindness for self and others and (d) how with all our thoughts, words and deeds, we are creating ours and others' future (i.e. the principle of cause and effect).
8. *Joyfully persevere*: Teaching mindfulness can be incredibly rewarding, but it can also be very challenging. Some people pick up the practice very quickly but others seem to struggle and give up as soon as they encounter a minor difficulty. One reason why this happens is because individuals try to cram in and find time for their practice amidst all of the other activities of their lives. This can create a stressful attitude towards the practice which ultimately ends up becoming a chore. For an experienced mindfulness teacher who has managed to taste first-hand the unconditional peace and boundless wisdom of the present moment, it is very sad when, for whatever reason, people do not continue with their practice. Of course, steps can (and should) be taken to try to convince or inspire people to persevere. For example, guiding participants to stop battling with themselves and

not to create a separation between mindfulness practice and the rest of their life can sometimes be effective. However, the truth is that for many individuals, conditions are simply not right at the moment for them to enter onto the path of awareness and although they warrant tremendous compassion, their choice must be respected. In such instances, mindfulness teachers should practice letting go and not see this as a personal failure.

9. *Find a suitable teacher*: In order to continue developing as both practitioners and teachers, it is essential that mindfulness teachers are in receipt of tuition and supervision from a more experienced mindfulness practitioner. As referred to above, teaching mindfulness can be emotionally and spiritually demanding and so this will not only be in the interests of participants, but will also act as a much needed source of support for the teacher. In our experience, whenever you encounter a mindfulness teacher that is spiritually inspired and is very in touch with the present moment, they are often under the auspices of a much more experienced teacher who nourishes them and gently guides them in their practice. In other words, just like the trunk of a tree that feeds and supports many braches, an experienced mindfulness teacher touches and inspires everybody they meet including those that come into contact with their students.
10. *Uphold the lineage of mindfulness*: As discussed above, there are currently individuals teaching mindfulness from diverse backgrounds and with differing motives. Therefore, it is possible that some mindfulness teachers might not believe they are involved in transmitting spiritual teachings and that suggestions such as '*uphold the lineage of mindfulness*' do not really apply to them. However, the fact of the matter is that mindfulness requires people to become intricately aware of their thoughts, words and actions, and it involves a subtler aspect of the self observing a grosser aspect of the self. In fact, we would argue that irrespective of whether people are aware of it, everything we do as human beings—including even the most simple acts such as drinking a cup of tea or saying hello—is spiritually significant and directly influences the extent to which we and others evolve as human and spiritual beings. If even people that have no interest in spiritual development are accountable for their actions in this manner, then how much more so does this apply to mindfulness teachers that are directly instructing and guiding people in the art of contemplative living?

    Thus, as we discussed in a previous *Mindfulness in Practice* article on *The Lineage of Mindfulness*, along with being a mindfulness teacher comes a tremendous responsibility to uphold the lineage of mindfulness and to exercise dedication and diligence in the way we live, breathe and teach the practice. This may sound a little intensive or even intimidating, but the truth is that for those mindfulness teachers that embody and commit themselves to the path of mindful living, the present moment reveals to them all of its splendour and wisdom and it sustains them with unlimited joy and spiritual energy.

Although the above points are by no means exhaustive, we believe that when they are implemented as part of a teacher-student or therapeutic relationship that is based on trust, loving-kindness and compassion, they will facilitate authentic and effective mindfulness teaching. However, every student or patient is completely unique and as much as possible, mindfulness teachers should tailor their approach according to individual needs. It should also be kept in mind that in certain instances and based on a thorough assessment (whether of a person's clinical and/or spiritual background), this might actually mean coming to the conclusion that mindfulness is not the most appropriate response.

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