

Mindfulness Practices and Emotional Development in Adult Life: A Developmental Framework for Research and Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of terrifying us is to turn us loose among our own emotions, to undermine our ability to reason with ourselves and with each other.

Editorial, July 9, 2005, *New York Times*
On the bombing of the London Underground

The experience of emotion overwhelming or distorting our ability to see, think, and behave in a reasonable manner is a common human experience. That unchecked emotion can cause harm to ourselves and to others may be a truism, but the need to work skillfully with strong emotional reactions for the benefit of a more cooperative, respectful, and sustainable mode of living with each other and the planet itself has never been more urgent. There is much wisdom in the idea that emotion can interfere with reason to detrimental effect. The biological purpose and evolutionary advantage of emotions is to lead us to act quickly without needing to think (Darwin & Ekman, 1998), and so when strong emotions arise we naturally tend to act without forethought, without full awareness of our actual behaviors or their consequences. But research shows that emotion also makes an essential contribution to our ability to reason and adapt (Barrett & Salovey, 2002; Ekman & Davidson, 1994; Frijda, 1986; Gray, 2004; Izard, 1992; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony & Turner, 1990), so the guiding interest of this study is not how we might supplant emotion with reason, but how we might optimally integrate emotion and reason. The specific form that interest takes in this study is an exploration of the potential of mindfulness practices to help us learn how to develop our emotional abilities, and integrate them with our ability to reason, for the purpose of changing unskillful behaviors.

When emotions such as fear, anger, greed, or hatred overwhelm our ability to think rationally and act compassionately, we cause tremendous—and unnecessary—suffering for ourselves and others at many levels. Most harmful emotional behaviors are habits, automatic reactions of which we are not fully aware, that cause unwanted and unintentional difficulties. The cumulative effects of mindlessly acting on simple unrestrained emotional impulses like pleasure (and its stronger forms, desire and greed) can lead people to act in ways that: significantly impair their health and cause premature death through poor dietary choices, smoking, and lack of exercise; cause widespread social suffering and economic instability through war and cycles of inflation and recession; and harm the ecosystem to the point that an increasing number of species are going extinct and much of life as we know it will cease to exist if we do not stop the human behaviors that are accelerating global climate change. Given the detrimental individual, societal, and ecological consequences of the cumulative effects of habitual, harmful emotional behaviors

by nearly seven billion human beings currently on the planet, the most fundamental question organizing this dissertation is:

As educators and psychologists working with adults, how might we facilitate learning to work with emotional reactions more skillfully, developing greater wisdom and compassion, in the service of lessening suffering and enhancing human wellness, social cooperation, and ecological sustainability and viability?

Although one might come up with many provisional ideas worthy of exploration in response to that question, this study focuses on the potential inherent in one particular technique, mindfulness, because the benefits of mindfulness for working with negative emotions have been extensively demonstrated in clinical contexts such as anxiety (Orsillo & Roemer, 2005), depression (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993), and stress (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Since mindfulness has been proven effective in working with strong distorting thoughts and emotions in clinical contexts, it ought to be helpful for working skillfully with bad habits and emotional overreactions in the context of normal adult life too. However, research on its potential to catalyze enduring beneficial changes in tenacious patterns of emotional overreaction in normal adult life has barely begun, and no research on mindfulness practices specifically from the perspective of adult development theory has yet been published.

The overarching theme that unites this dissertation is adult development, meaning an exploration of processes of change in adult life that result in enhanced abilities and functioning. Within that, my focus is on change for the better in working with strong emotions such as anger and fear, to explore how we might develop abilities that can help enhance clear, compassionate thinking and wise action in situations where strong emotions would otherwise cause us to misperceive, misunderstand, and overreact. Throughout, my understanding of the specific potential of mindfulness practices to catalyze adult emotional development is anchored in four perspectives: psychology, biology, Buddhism, and adult development theory. That makes this dissertation inherently interdisciplinary, for better and worse. As a potential strength, I hope this broad overview will help clarify some confusions about what mindfulness is, and how it operates in different mindfulness practices, by integrating information about the subjective experience of mindfulness with objective findings from cutting edge research including neurobiology. On the other hand, each individual reader is likely to think that some sections go into far too much detail depending on his or her particular background and interests. As my advisor Bob Kegan says so charmingly in his lectures, in this approach there is “something to irritate and annoy everyone.” Nevertheless, although I undertake several complex theoretical excursions, my ultimate goal is pragmatic. I draw deeply from Western theory and research, and the collective wisdom of 2500 years of Buddhist practice, but always to better understand how to help people learn to work skillfully with intense emotions in their every day experience and in their personal and professional relationships.

Mindfulness and its developmental potential is explored theoretically, experientially, and empirically in seven semi-independent chapters in this dissertation. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of change, and why or how mindfulness ought to be an excellent catalyst of adult emotional development. Through these explorations I hope to provide a broad overview and a solid foundation that will help improve teaching and research on mindfulness practices as a

catalyst of adult emotional development. The theoretical and experiential explorations in Chapters 1-4 integrate research findings and ideas from multiple academic disciplines, expert accounts, and thirty years of my own practice. Chapters 5-7 report the results of an empirical pilot study that I designed for exploring associations between mindfulness and emotional personality characteristics as the first step in a developmental approach. The conclusion summarizes and integrates findings from the theoretical and empirical explorations, addressing implications for future teaching and research on mindfulness, and implications for human development.

THEORETICAL and EXPERIENTIAL EXPLORATIONS: An Overview of Chapters 1-4

Chapter 1: Mapping the Developmental Terrain: Psychological Change Processes in Adult Life

In most satisfying learning journeys, especially those with panoramic vistas and foreign cultural traditions, having a good “map” that makes the overview clear at the beginning of the journey is extremely useful, so that is how I begin. Chapter 1 is written in three sections that introduce the theoretical issues that are explored in detail in Chapters 2-4, and outlines the thinking that shaped the design of the empirical pilot study (Chapters 5-7). Because the theoretical distinctions between mindfulness skills, states, and practices may not be familiar to many readers, I have attempted to make these more accessible by using examples based on expert accounts, my own practice, and everyday life.

Although development is the unifying theme of this dissertation, adult development theory is not the ideal starting point because it requires delving into some fairly abstract concepts and language that are likely to be unfamiliar to most readers. Similarly, the excursions into Buddhist theory are tough going if you are not already familiar with this way of thinking. When introducing new concepts it is generally helpful to start with the concrete and work up to the abstract, so that is how Chapter 1 has been organized. The first section introduces the concept of development in biology, and some of the ways in which researchers have sought to bridge biology and psychology, as relevant for the study of mindfulness. The second section introduces some myths about the scientific method, and a number of challenges that have to be addressed to study potential behavior changes associated with mindfulness practice. Through a careful examination of two prominent neurobiological studies of mindfulness, I identify important issues for the design of the empirical part of this study. I then introduce two different ways that Western researchers think about psychological change processes in adult life (state versus trait change, and content versus structure change) that hold great potential for the study of mindfulness and adult emotional development. In the third section, I establish the specific rationale for the choice of personality traits as the framework for my pilot study of the potential of mindfulness to catalyze adult emotional development.

For those who read the dissertation all the way through there will be some inevitable redundancy. However, because of the inherent complexity of the theoretical explorations, I hope that some repetition will be useful, and will help make the in-depth discussion of the theoretical issues more accessible. In addition, the overview presented in Chapter 1 should also make it possible

for a reader to skip the theoretical explorations in Chapters 2-4 entirely and still find the empirical pilot study sensible.

Chapter 2: Mindfulness, Meditative Mental States, and States of Consciousness

In this chapter I present a refined model for understanding what mindfulness is, how it operates, how it develops, and the kinds of abilities it might catalyze. In the first section, through an integrative literature review, I establish the need for a developmental model of mindfulness by highlighting confusions and differences about how to define and study mindfulness. I propose that mindfulness be defined at the most fundamental level as the cognitive skill of orienting attention to a chosen object of attention in the present, resulting in a state of mindful attention characterized by enhanced accuracy and detail of perception. I argue that this state of mindful attention is the common denominator across the many diverse applications in which mindfulness can be practiced (e.g., cognitive enhancement and education [Langer, 1989, 1997], stress reduction and clinical conditions [Kabat-Zinn 1990; Hayes, Strohshal, & Wilson, 1999; Orsillo & Roemer, 2005; Linehan, 1993]), and meditation practices [Transcendental Meditation, Buddhist meditation practices, and others]). Through a careful exploration of Buddhist theory and practice, I focus on the development of mindfulness in the two main types of Theravada Buddhist meditation practices (calming and insight meditation practices). I clarify how calming meditation practices can be used to develop a state of mindful absorption, and how insight meditation practices primarily develop a state of mindful awareness, and I clarify where outcomes associated with these practices overlap and differ. I then present and elaborate a developmental model of mindfulness and mindful mental states.

In the second section I explore mindfulness from an experiential perspective. First I distinguish between mindful mental states that are used to focus attention in different ways, and the states of consciousness that can be induced and explored through practicing these mindful mental states. I then describe in greater detail each of the three states of mindful attention, mindful absorption, and mindful awareness from an experiential perspective. In the third section I use real life examples to illustrate how these mindful states can lead to the development of important emotional abilities.

Chapter 3: The Theravada Buddhist Theory of Mind and the Transformational Potential of Mindful Awareness

The third chapter delves deeply into Buddhist psychological theory to explore how the state of mindful awareness is understood, and its potential to catalyze transformational change. In the first section I draw an important distinction between conceptual and pre-conceptual ways of knowing our experience, arguing that the state of mindful awareness helps quiet our normal conceptual thought process with the result of making pre-conceptual experience more accessible. The second section develops this distinction in detail through a close examination of the Buddhist understanding of the mind and how mindful awareness is used to explore subjective experience and mental states in terms of what Western psychology calls somatic, affective, and cognitive processes. In the third section I return to the distinction between conceptual and pre-conceptual ways of knowing to present a model of how mindful awareness can integrate information from both conceptual and pre-conceptual modes, presenting evidence from

neurobiology that supports Buddhist and Western theoretical understandings of this distinction. The fourth section concludes by exploring how, in practice, mindful awareness can help catalyze transformational emotional development.

Chapter 4: Mindfulness and Adult Development: Complexity, Simplicity, and the Path to Enlightenment

Chapter 4 establishes a solid bridge between the two theoretical contexts chosen for this study that explicitly address adult development: Kegan's constructive-developmental approach (Kegan, 1982, 1994), and Theravada Buddhist psychology. First, I present some fundamental concepts from developmental psychology and Kegan's theory of adult development. Next, using the distinction between content and structure, I argue that mindfulness practices potentially catalyze two kinds of emotional development that correspond to the states of mindful absorption and mindful awareness. In the final section, I argue that adult emotional development is best understood as a kind of radical simplicity that is quite different from the development of complexity that currently defines Western theories of adult development. This argument rests on two pillars. First, through a comparison of Kegan's understanding of the development of complexity and the path to enlightenment in Theravada Buddhism, I argue that enlightenment does not require a high degree of complexity. Second, I argue that enlightenment requires the development of non-elaborative pre-conceptual ways of knowing explored in Chapter 3 that are related to but fundamentally different from the conceptual abilities that are developed in higher levels of complexity. I argue that these pre-conceptual ways of knowing catalyze a kind of "radical simplicity" that explains the potential of insight meditation practice to catalyze emotional development and transformational change.

EMPIRICAL EXPLORATIONS: An Overview of Chapters 5-7

Chapter 5: Mindfulness, Personality, and Emotional Intelligence: Theoretical Frameworks for Studying Potential Trait Change

Chapter 5 provides a transition from theory to empirical research by focusing on the issue of behavior change. I present my argument for using the frameworks of personality psychology (via the Five Factor Model of personality, McCrae & Costa, 2003) and a behavioral model of Emotional Intelligence (Bar-On, 2004a) and their assessment instruments as a first step for documenting which normal emotion-related personality characteristics (traits) may potentially change in association with mindfulness practice.

Chapter 6: Mindfulness and Potential Emotional Trait Change in Adult Life: A Pilot Study

In this chapter I report and discuss findings from an empirical pilot study designed to document that associations between mindfulness and emotional personality characteristics exist as an essential first step in the research process. This pilot study explores the potential for enduring change in emotion-related personality characteristics by identifying which traits are associated with mindfulness in a sample of leaders and leadership development coaches. Leadership was chosen as the context for the pilot study because effective leaders manage considerable social and emotional stress, and are generally quite strategic and savvy about how to use emotions—

positive and negative—to motivate people to cooperate to achieve common goals. The data show strong significant associations between higher scores on mindfulness and lower scores on negative emotion-related personality characteristics, and higher scores on mindfulness and positive emotional characteristics, using the well established assessment instruments from the Five Factor Model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992), Bar-On's model of Emotional Intelligence (1997), and the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2008).

Chapter 7: Mindful Leaders: Self-reported Changes and Enhanced Leadership Effectiveness Attributed to Mindfulness Practices

Chapter 7 explores how individuals in the study who practice mindfulness experience it in their lives, and how they think it has helped them in their work as leaders or as leadership development coaches and consultants. First, I present the results of a survey that I designed for participants to self-report changes in their personality characteristics that they think they have experienced, and that they attribute to their mindfulness practices. I also explore which characteristics they believe have enhanced their effectiveness as leaders. Next, I present brief profiles of three individual leaders who represent the strongest associations from the pilot study, to explore how they experience their practices, and to hear from them in their own words about what motivates them to practice, and what difference they think their practices have made in their lives and in their effectiveness as leaders. Last, I analyze their responses to a few written follow-up questions to identify important issues and themes for future qualitative research.

Conclusion: Implications and Integrated Insights

In the conclusion, I first discuss implications from the theoretical and empirical explorations for future teaching and research on mindfulness and adult emotional development. Then I end with three integrated insights addressed to those readers who have a broad interest in human development, and how I understand both "radical simplicity" and complexity as paths to realizing our potential for enlightenment.

In summary, this study explores different aspects of how mindfulness practices can help adults identify, regulate, and transform harmful emotional behaviors that diminish one's ability to think wisely and act compassionately when experiencing intense emotions. In the process, I hope to clarify how mindfulness practices can make us more aware of the full spectrum of our inner life and mental processes, especially emotional processes, with a particular emphasis on how we can gently restrain those habitual emotional behaviors that harm ourselves and others, and develop the ability to permanently transform them for the better. I hope also to provide compelling reasons to conduct further research into how mindfulness practices can help us learn to discern the difference between helpful and harmful emotional behaviors in normal adult life, especially those that are immediately pleasurable but harmful in their cumulative long-term effects, and those that arise from strong negative reactions and lead us to behave in ways that we often later regret. Learning to gently refrain from harmful behaviors while enhancing beneficial ones holds the promise of improving physical and mental health, and personal and professional relationships. In the aggregate, such individual efforts could also make a valuable contribution to the future quality of life for our planet and species, by learning to see more clearly the impact

of our actions on others and the environment, and refraining from those actions and reactions that cause harm to the good of the whole.

This study was conducted with deep respect for the difficulty of working consciously and skillfully with mindless habits and any intense emotions, as well as appreciation for the value and importance of emotion in human lives. If mindfulness practices can help us become more fully aware of our automatic emotional reactions, and see clearly our unique patterns of thought and behavior based on them, it has the potential to help us learn how to better reason with ourselves and others, and consciously choose wisely when to act and when not to act. As educational and psychological researchers, it is our job to document and accessibly explain the developmental trajectories associated with specific types of mindfulness practices and their outcomes, so that we can more effectively teach and support people in their efforts to change for the better. It is my sincere hope that this dissertation will contribute to advancing that important work.