Perspectives of mindfulness

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Introduction

The idea and practice of mindfulness has a long history in some religions and is also articulated in a number of secular discourses. An awareness of the value of being mindful is now being recognized and researched, with particular reference to the work of Kabat-Zinn & Santorelli (1999). Training in mindfulness can be found in such things as cognitive therapy (Teasdale et al. 2000, Williams et al. 2000) and as an integral feature of dialectical behaviour therapy (Quigley 2000). The work of Langer (2000) is exploring the value of mindfulness in learning. Other work can be found for example in the areas of stress reduction and the management of chronic pain. The range of literature suggests a science of mindfulness is evolving.

Buddhism has a long history in advocating for mindfulness as a worthwhile practice. The skill is developed through meditation. What is learnt through this experience has a wider application to all dimensions of the practitioner’s life. In this article the Buddhist perspective of mindfulness is used to illuminate and contrast similarities and differences in both understanding and application in relation to some contemporary secular discourses that have contributed to the western understanding of the psychological nature of being.

The discourses of relevance to psychiatric nursing considered were chosen because the notion of mindfulness or mindfulness-like behaviours is described in the writings of those who developed the perspective, or is evident in other authors who write and publish within these sets of ideas. These discourses seek to explain the psychology of the indiv...
Contingency and mindfulness

Mindfulness from the Buddhist position is an awareness of being aware. This requires both attention and concentration to be present in the current moment. Mindfulness can also be applied to the notion of memory. When applied in this way it means clear and accurate recall: ‘A kind of bare attention which sees things as if for the first time . . . as they really are’ (Harvey 2000a, p. 246).

Being mindful requires the person to attend, to be consciously aware of, the emergent nature of phenomena in consciousness and to recognize the nature of attachments made to these phenomena as they occur. The notion of a river is a useful metaphor for illuminating how Buddhists understand the nature of the stream of phenomena in consciousness. Consider how easily consciousness can be lost or awareness interfered with. Being mindful means observing this phenomenological stream as it passes through consciousness without forming attachments or making judgements.

Forming attachments to phenomena in consciousness gives them significance. Phenomena become objects in and of consciousness. Objects in consciousness from the Buddhist point of view are conditional on the ‘inter dependent relationship’ (De Silva 2000, p. 18) of phenomena we call cognition, feelings, volition, perception and consciousness. All are equally dependent upon physical characteristics being present. Mind and body are not separate entities. ‘Mindfulness involves a state of mind that suggests that a clear division between the psychological and the physiological is not tenable (Langer 1992, p. 302).

The Buddhist practice of mindfulness challenges the person to be aware of the signification process, or one’s attachments and intentions in relation to phenomena in consciousness as they emerge. Intention as a concept will be explored later in the text. Mindfulness in Buddhist discourse is linked to the belief that individuals with awareness do have a choice in what phenomena they attend to and how they behave.

Forming attachment to phenomena in consciousness is according to Buddhism a reason for human unhappiness and suffering. We see this in every day mental health practice as individuals labour and suffer for their delusions. However, this observation extends into all types of phenomenal attachment, not just what is conventionally understood to be pathological.

The origins of suffering are explained as follows. Attachment to phenomena, objectification and conceptualization begin a process of both misunderstanding phenomena and the nature of reality. A constructed potential is being developed in the mind as if the named object in awareness has an inherent existence outside of the consciousness that conceived it. ‘They do not exist in their own right, but only have an existence dependent upon many factors, including a consciousness that conceptualises them’ (Dalai Lama 2002, p. 145).

Mindfulness is not generally oriented towards the future. As a skill, mindfulness is usually focused towards awareness of phenomena in the present moment and for letting go. Letting go of attachments, renunciation, or ‘un-integrating’ (Epstein 1998, p. 48), for the benefit of self and others is understood to be the mechanism for reducing the likelihood of suffering.

Un-integrating or letting go helps to release the person from developing or reinforcing habitual cognitive/emotional/behavioural patterns that result in unskilful or unhelpful behaviours. Perhaps the need for recognizing the consequences of attachment and the benefit of mindfulness is illuminated in the verse of a poem called London by William Blake (1757–1827):

In every cry of every man
In every infant’s cry I hear
In every voice, in every ban
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear.

Mindfulness is concerned to recognize the nature and consequences of Blake’s ‘mind-forg’d manacles’, and of letting go.

Conceptual reality for the practising Buddhist exists as a convention, is empty and therefore without an inherent existence. The emptiness of phenomena should not be understood to be a nihilistic position. Phenomena are understood not to exist in themselves. Phenomena are interdependent or contingent upon other phenomena being present or absent. Consider the flame of a candle and all that is required for this phenomenon to appear. The phenomenon of a candle flame does not exist in itself. The flame is therefore empty of independent or inherent existence in its own right. It is for these reasons Buddhists understand phenomena to be both empty and imperma-
Instincts and mindfulness

The Buddhist practice of mindfulness, or the ‘watcher self’ (Deatherage 1975, p. 136), could be seen to have a number of applications in relation to Freudian theory. The practice has certain features in common with the Freudian practice called ‘free association’. Free association is an approach adopted by an analytical psychotherapist that requires the person in analysis to say what comes into consciousness without prior censorship or interpretation. The method is believed to be useful in accessing what Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) called the unconscious mind, the hidden nature of man, the location of repressed potential. Locating the nature of what is hidden or repressed for the purpose of interpretive analysis is understood to be therapeutic. The Freudian unconscious is the location of a ‘whole set of instinctual wish impulses’ (Bocock 1981, p. 7). ‘The unconscious system obeys the pleasure principle and seeks pleasurable states of the psyche, but would ignore external reality without the guidance of the conscious and preconscious perceptual systems’ (Bocock 1981, p. 8).

These unconscious impulses are understood to have an affinity with observed behaviours in other non-human life and are primarily focused towards the satisfaction of innate sexual and aggressive predispositions or the life and death instincts. Human social organization and the individual find ways of channelling and controlling these behaviours to achieve socially acceptable ways of satisfaction or gratification. One mechanism is called repression. Free association is a process whereby the internal censor that works to keep repressed materials out of conscious awareness is given an opportunity to relax.

Delmonte (1990, pp. 57–63) makes the following observation:

Mindfulness meditation is similar to free association . . . Mindfulness enhances insight and facilitates the integration of the perceptual, cognitive and behavioural aspects of human functioning. The mindful component of meditation being opposite to the mechanism of repression and promotes health.

Earlier observations from the Buddhist perspective indicate that mindfulness is only concerned with observation, insight and letting go. Delmonte’s (1990) notion that mindfulness from the Freudian perspective facilitates integration identifies a dimension that is not a feature of a Buddhist understanding of mindful practice.

In Freudian theory, being mindful can also be seen as an everyday feature of the censor. Being mindful helps the person to recognize and contain, or consciously suppress, those aspects of the unconscious mind that leak into consciousness and cause distress to the person or others. Mindfulness with suppression from a Freudian point of view can be said to fail when slips of the tongue embarrass the person or others. Suppression from the Bhuddist perspective is not mindfulness and indicates attachment is present. In both the Buddhist and Freudian senses, suppression is a process that does not resolve anything for the person troubled by the experience.

Mindfulness and archetypes

The analytical approach of Carl Jung (1875–1961) differs from that of Freud. Jungian psychology is developmental and ontological in orientation, related to the process of becoming an individual. This is realized through the expression of the archetypal structures inherent within the personality of all human beings. Archetypes are understood to be inherent predispositions, states of potential, or those capacities that make us human.

Archetypes are the innate products of our shared collective history and in the individual can be activated in given circumstances. Jung’s collective unconscious has similarities to what a group of Buddhist practitioners called the Yogacarins refer to as the ‘eighth form of consciousness, or that which is the basis for the rest . . . their fundamental root . . . the storehouse consciousness . . . a storehouse for karmic seeds, a record of a being’s history of action. These reproduce themselves overtime’ (Harvey 2000a, p. 107).

Evidence for reproducing themselves over time as seemingly stable elements within a personality is demonstrated when individuals, in the absence of residual brain damage, fully recover from periods of unconsciousness and continue with life and living as before this period of absence. From the Jungian point of view, the potential within these innate archetypes can exist in contradiction to the persona or the public face the person is mindful to present for the purpose of convention, or to meet the expectations of others.

Active imagination is a therapeutic approach developed by Jung and is a mindfulness meditation like practice designed to enable the psyche freedom of expression. ‘To begin with, one is usually a mere spectator, but if one is to experience the reality of the psyche and submit to its transformative power then one must enter the fantasy and become a committed participant in the drama’ (Stevens 2001, p. 135).
This approach has some similarities to Tibetan Buddhist Tantric visualization techniques. Mindfulness with committed participation, or engaging with phenomena in consciousness as if they are real, makes the Jungian practice at this point differ from the non-attached observer position required for Buddhist mindfulness described earlier in this paper.

**Mindfulness, control and creativity**

Constructionists after George Kelly (1905–1967) assume man to be an agent, actively engaged with his environment and seeking all the time to influence and predict events. Prediction is linked with attempts to control and expectations, and is oriented towards future goals or outcomes.

Realistically, the future is something we cannot know. Life and awareness only exist in the present moment. Outside of living in the present moment we are dependent upon such things as recall, speculation and anticipation. Langer (2000, p. 220), when describing mindfulness in relation to learning, makes the following observation, ‘a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context’. Being actively engaged with phenomena with interpretation is not a neutral process. Bias, values and evaluations inform the process. From the Buddhist position, active interpretation is engagement; it is different to observation and can be described as a form of attachment.

Langer (1992, 2000) contrasts mindfulness with another concept called mindlessness. Mindlessness is linked to all those habitual behaviours performed without attention. The person is not being mindful when they lapse into habitual ways of thinking, feeling or responding. Mindful awareness in the Buddhist sense is ‘the energy that allows us to recognize habit energy every time it manifests’ (Thich Nhat Hanh 1998, pp. 24–25). Examples of habitual behaviours include such things as unconsidered or predictable cognitive and emotional responses, fantasizing, ruminating on the past and worrying about the future, games playing, living with anger, hate, following the story when experiencing intrusive thoughts and indulging in other forms of addictive behaviour.

The constructionist position of Langer sees mindfulness like the Buddhists located in the here and now. Mindfulness for constructionists is an ongoing process of evaluation, naming and cognitive framing or re-framing in context to obtain a better purchase on reality for the present and the future.

In Buddhist terms, if one is continually revising and extending the object content of the conceptual mind, one is creating the conditions for further problems because the underlying nature of reality is not being recognized. The phenomenological categories one constructs and the true nature of reality are for Buddhists not one and the same thing.

The constructionist position has some affinity with the Buddhist notion of a phenomenological or conventional reality. However, the position in respect of ‘realities of which the world is composed’ (Kelly 1963, p. 9) seems to assume that objects and realities exist in themselves independent of ‘a consciousness that conceptualises them’ (Dalai Lama 2002, p. 145), other interdependent phenomena, and therefore do not change. Reality therefore exists outside of conscious mediation, waiting to be named or labelled.

What exists conventionally through the naming and framing of objects in consciousness is not the same as the experience. A shared or conventional understanding of a constructed reality with others is a social, ideological or a political position. Scientific understanding is no different. Constructed realities and systems of classification can unravel and vanish, or change in all sorts of diverse ways. It is the process of naming and framing that constructs and then misrepresents reality through signifying interdependent phenomena as single conceptual objects.

Constructionists replace constructs that are unhelpful and generate new conceptual attachments. From the Buddhist point of view, mindfulness can be viewed as a vehicle for a de-constructing process in terms of conventional reality. Buddhists like constructionists repeatedly question, but the assumptions and purpose of being mindful in constructionist discourse are different.

**Mindfulness and actualization**

Contemporary psychology has developed its own branch of phenomenology or humanism. Humanistic psychology sees human motivation directing the person towards a self-actualized state. Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) articulated the notion of actualization in relation to his hierarchy of human needs. Self-actualization is understood to be a peak state, linked to self-directing growth and personal development, or the satisfaction of needs. Any achievement has to be seen in the context of ‘the reality of biological injustice and unfairness’ (Hoffman 1996, p. 64). Growth and actualization in this discourse is therefore linked to ideas about capacity. Notions about the capacity of individuals begin to inform social practices associated with beliefs and opinions about difference and help to justify varieties of social exclusion or inclusion.

Maslow makes a number of observations about Buddhism, and also some observations about western culture that have some affinity with Buddhist thinking. Cultural observations include the observation that ‘perhaps we
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should redefine happiness as experiencing real emotions, over real problems and real tasks’ (Hoffman 1996, pp. 22–23). Experiencing is compatible with the practice of mindfulness, though the notion of ‘real’ from the Buddhist perspective is difficult when phenomena are understood to be empty and impermanent and change. Harvey (2000b, p. 69) refers to these as the ‘three marks of all conditioned phenomena’. Emptiness, impermanence and change illuminate the contingent nature of all phenomena.

The value judgement real assumes that some emotions, problems and tasks are somehow more authentic and valid, whilst others are perhaps not so, they must be unreal or tainted in some way. An unreal experience is a real experience to the person experiencing it. Buddhist mindfulness is concerned to observe any thought, feeling, emotion or perception without judgement.

Maslow’s observations that, ‘we must abandon our expectation of never ending contentment and serenity’ (Hoffman 1996, p. 23) shows recognition of the role that expectations or fanciful attachments have in creating disappointment and suffering. Maslow also makes observations about what he calls inward integration, or his understanding and name for the Buddhist way. Integration is a problematic concept when applied to Buddhism. Integration suggests attachments exist to phenomena with some form of emotional and conceptual closure having occurred. To be inwardly integrated is not the same as being mindfully aware, or observing and letting go of phenomena without evaluation as they pass through consciousness.

Self-actualization may be a concept that appears to have some affinity with what following a spiritual path in Buddhism is about. However, the state of spiritual realization that is promised in Buddhist discourse with right effort and mindfulness is associated with other practices and a person’s orientation towards life, their choices and other beings. These practices are neither worldly or ego oriented.

The idea of behaviour being need driven has an association with ideas about requirement, possessiveness or attachments. In Buddhist thought all attachments create the conditions for suffering. To have a need is to suffer until such time as the need is met. Having achieved something, the suffering could continue, because impermanence and change indicate that what has been achieved can be lost. Suffering is therefore threefold, once whilst striving to meet the need, holding onto satisfaction and then losing it due to change.

Ego-mediated needs in the pursuit of actualisation, peak experience and satisfaction, suggest that perhaps the belief that ‘no gain without pain’ applies. However, creating pain or suffering in the satisfaction of an ego-driven need from a Buddhist point of view is paradoxical. If the concept actualization applies in Buddhist discourse, the person works to transcend the need and break the attachment. Actualization would come from letting go, not from pursuit or accumulation.

Actualizing an idea of a Self in Buddhist terms is also problematic. The notion of a Self does not exist in itself. The notion of Self is a convention and is contingent upon other interrelated phenomena. Buddhists believe there is no inherent Self to actualize. If there is no Self to actualize, only a phenomenological illusion, that is constructed identified with and reinforced through attachments and interaction with other beings, validating the concept of self-actualization as an experience in itself and of itself becomes difficult.

To understand Maslow’s observation in relation to Buddhism, it is better quoted in full:

. . . that Zen sages and Buddhist monks [sex bias here] are more emotionally integrated than self-actualisers in Western civilisation, but the Eastern monks seem inwardly more integrated at a much more lower level of comprehensiveness than those who must not only integrate with themselves, but also with a complicated external world. In effect escaping and avoiding it is ultimately a form of phonestis. Huffman 1996, p. 33)

Maslow’s position either sees self-actualization and the Buddhist notion of mindful awareness as altogether separate, or that the Buddhist experience of being is an incomplete state in respect of western expectations and opportunities for development. Somewhere on the road to actualization, but not quite fully arrived. Maslow’s position assumes that the experiences available must be somehow more developmental of the person in the west than those lived by a Buddhist monk. The observation in respect of eastern and western comprehensiveness seems to suggest an underlying ethnocentricity in Maslow’s ideas. Complexity creates problems and paradoxes for the conceptual mind to resolve. Conceptuality and reality are for Buddhists not one and the same thing. Mindfulness meditation is the starting point of a process for both recognizing and experiencing this awareness.

Mindfulness and meaning

The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) demonstrates a number of similarities to the Buddhist approach to phenomena in consciousness. The idea of consciousness existing in relation to something else identifies the contingent nature of awareness. ‘Consciousness as being conscious of something, or relating to objects . . . a fundamental characteristic of psychic life’ (Husserl 1925, p. 22).
A key concept in this perspective is the idea of intentionality, after Franz Brentano (1838–1917). Intentionality is understood to be a capacity of the mind. The modern use of intention relates to motive, action or purposeful behaviour. Intentionality for Brentano (MIA) is an ‘act of the mind’. In the act of intending, the mind embraces and signifies phenomena in consciousness. Intending and objectification create a subjective state based on a union. At the time and point of union, the objects within consciousness and subject become one. Each is dependent upon the other. Acts of the mind precede states of the mind and states of being.

The purpose of exploring this process of union for Husserl was epistemological. He sought to ‘ground knowledge of reality, by looking at reality itself’ (Crotty 1996, p. 30). Reality is understood to be the experience of the object in the consciousness of the being. Husserl calls objects in consciousness ‘essences’. The methodology developed by Husserl is designed to explore the nature of these essences and so illuminate the structures that inform consciousness, the nature and origins of knowledge.

Essences are understood to be sources of meaning. This notion has similar features to the Jungian idea of archetypes. Meaning given to objects in consciousness in this perspective pre-exists any form of externalization and is an integral part of being. Externalization and meaning can be expressed verbally, non-verbally, in writing, through music or other art forms. The objective or the scientific scrutiny of the meaning within the essence is the basis by which knowledge and personal knowledge is either validated or transcended.

To achieve this level of scrutiny Husserl proposed a technique called ‘bracketing’. The person has to learn to bracket, or suspend the essence that presents itself in consciousness, and to look inward to see what it really is. Bracketing has similar features to the Buddhist practice of non-attached, non-judgemental mindfulness. Depraz et al. (2000, p. 121) suggest ‘mindfulness can be described as a reflective act, becoming aware or mindful . . . requiring a suspension of habitual thought and judgement; a conversion of attention from the exterior, or letting go of the worldly show, to the interior; a state of receptivity to experience. We ‘move from looking for, to letting come’ (Depraz et al. 2000, p. 125).

The purpose of looking inwards for Husserl is to attend to the object of immediate experience and if necessary transcend what is conscious by developing new perspectives of the experience. Connelly (1999, p. 420) talks about ‘being present in the moment’.

Being present in the moment, with a suspension of intending enables an introspective analysis to occur of the essence as it presents. Only by this form of examination can new forms of meaning from lived experience emerge. Mindfulness in this context is supportive of a process that encourages beings to learn and benefit from reflection and to question the foundations of their current knowledge from experience. Bracketing is similar to the Buddhist practice of non-attached observation of phenomena.

**Mindfulness and existence**

For Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), phenomenology is a method, and its goal is to capture the nature of being, ‘whose essence lies in existence’ Mulhall (1996, p. 16). Unlike that of Husserl, this perspective is about existence and choice. Heidegger takes the position that from birth we are immersed in cultural and social processes that both continue and change over time. This is a dynamic over which there is little control. This background of history and attachment to culture and context is always with us. The historical point in time and the social context we find ourselves in are circumstances of being that we cannot really step outside of. It is part of being, almost like breathing. We are a ‘being-in-the-world’.

Bracketing according to Heidegger is not really possible. If this ‘in-the-world’ framework for interpretation could be suspended, the being would have no mechanism by which to recognize phenomena. The capacity to recognize suggests the mind requires a phenomenological matrix within which the phenomena can be caught and interpreted. This interpretive framework stays with the being, providing a frame of reference through which to understand the consequences of experiences, choices and actions.

Interpretation and choice is everything for both understanding our own needs, the needs of others and the world. The notion of being can therefore be said to have multipheno-nominal elements and has similarities to the Buddhist insight that Self is a contingent state.

A being is both a ‘being-in-the-world’ and a ‘being-of-the-world’. The development of the social being-of-the-world is never fully resolved with respect to what it has become, will be and will not be. Choice prevails ‘by identifying with certain . . . activities, traits, life styles, in visions of the good and rejecting others, we reveal what it is to flourish as a human being’ (Mulhall 1996, p. 15).

A self-reflexive relationship exists between what Heidegger calls Dasein and what has come to be, or, what the being would like to be. This relationship with the phenomena of existence is not a tension-free relationship. From this perspective, human beings unlike other beings have the capacity to understand and evaluate what they are, would like to change, and also recognize what is not achievable. All these states orient human beings towards states of mindfulness and choice.
The ‘has-become-being’, is for Heidegger a potentially ‘inauthentic position’ (Mulhall 1996, pp. 38–39). The ‘has-become-being’ may have avoided making relevant choices for Dasein. Dasein’s potential is not being realized. A position similar to Jung’s explanation of persona.

Mindfulness in this context relates to being aware and understanding the processes that support ‘being-in-the-world’, a phenomenological world from which there is no real escape, a world providing relative to historical time, contemporary concepts, theories, assumptions, values and judgements for understanding the nature of self, others and the social world. A codependent relationship exists. Mindfulness becomes a process linked to an ongoing evaluation of both potential and existence. Dasein seeks attachments and is mindful to change these when it is appropriate to do so.

Summary
The mindful state or the ‘watcher self’ (Deatherage 1975) can be seen to be an important dimension of the phenomena we call cognition. This analysis suggests that mindfulness is a discourse-dependent concept that can be articulated to a number of different positions. When seeking to apply the concept therapeutically or developmentally at least five positions emerge:

- Non-attached and non-judgemental observation of phenomena.
- Un-censored articulation of phenomena for interpretation.
- Embracing phenomena for incorporation, identity and personality development.
- Ongoing interpretation and evaluation of phenomena for the purpose of creativity, continuity or change in respect of meaning or understanding.
- A precursor to reflection and choice.

Secondly, concept awareness is important for psychiatric nurses. Practice without an awareness of philosophy is perhaps unsafe when it is clear that both the meaning and practice implied by a concept is not universally shared.

Thirdly, developing an awareness of a belief system that was once culturally distant like Buddhism, challenges the psychiatric nurse to be increasingly aware of trans-cultural diversity, other systems of psychology, and what this means for individualized care. Buddhism also provides a particular and challenging perspective on the nature of phenomena, consciousness, the notion of Self and the nature of reality.

Fourthly, mindfulness as practised within the Buddhist discourse is worthy of consideration as a skill for healthy living: a mental skill that has within it a potential for individuals to become aware of choice in relation to the phenomena they choose to embrace in consciousness. Blake’s ‘mind forg’d manacles’ perhaps have an opportunity of being unlocked and thrown away; ‘a moment of revelation’ (Depraz et al. 2000, p. 134).

Finally, practising mindfulness may not be appropriate for everyone. Further clinical research will possibly need to identify those situations where it has a value as the emerging science of mindfulness as its impact on practice continues to develop.

Conclusion
This paper presents for consideration the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. A skill and a practice designed to enable individuals to have both a freedom from and insight into the consequences of embracing phenomena as they emerge into consciousness. Learning how to manage the capricious nature of the phenomenal object we call the mind is worthy of being recognized as an important life skill that is useful for protecting one’s mental health and for raising awareness of choice in action.

References


