

Mindfulness Meditation and Social Change: from Therapy to Wisdom and Ethics

Mark Leonard

THE Buddha lived two and half thousand years ago in Northern India. Around two centuries later, Ashoka, the great Indian Emperor, shaped his empire around the Buddha's teachings. In the following thousand years or so, Buddhism spread across Asia. The Dhamma had a profound effect as it adapted to different cultures in different times and different traditions evolved. In the last century or so outposts of every Asian Buddhist tradition have sprung up in the West. Buddhism has now become a World Religion and is adapting to and shaping the modern World in new ways.

In 1979, a molecular biologist, Jon Kabat-Zin set up a clinic at the University of Massachussets Medical School where he taught Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to people suffering from chronic pain and the stress of living with chronic illness. Kabat-Zin built this course out of a combination of Zen meditation, Vipassana from Theravada Buddhism and yoga but it was taught in secular language to make it accessible to this new audience.

Mindfulness meditation involves consciously paying attention to sensory experience from moment-to-moment. When the mind wanders and becomes absorbed in thinking, attention is redirected to sensations. This develops acceptance of what takes place in subjective experience and awareness of the way the mind becomes distracted. The practice enables a person to better understand and accept patterns of thoughts, emotions and feelings rather than react automatically to changing conditions.

During the 1990's, three clinical psychologists, Jon Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Mark Williams, became interested in the potential for meditation as a new treatment to prevent depression. MBSR was the right fit as it was a repeatable programme, taught in secular language and previous-

ly delivered in a medical environment. They called their course, Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and so, with this work, mindfulness meditation gained a scientific foundation. An explosion of interest in mindfulness as a therapy, self-help and in the workplace has followed.

To Change Society, We Need to Change Inside

Up until about ten years ago, I worked in waste management and before then in fisheries. I wished to make a contribution to reducing the rate at which we are destroying natural resources and create a more sustainable future. To do this I was working to raise awareness and applying policy to reduce waste and increase recycling, however, it seemed that doing things like this was not making much difference.

It dawned on me that the problems we face today are systemic across society and that people need to change inside before they do things differently. The only way that I could see this happening was to find a way to teach meditation widely across society. And so, I got involved with the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies to raise awareness of the Buddhist tradition and then in 2008, helped to establish its sister charity, the Oxford Mindfulness Centre (OMC).

I became the Mindfulness in the Workplace Project Champion at the OMC and then set up a company to teach mindfulness in the workplace. Others had also been experimenting with mindfulness in the workplace but this approach was different to most. It was adapted from a therapy based on scientific understanding as opposed to Buddhist meditation adapted for the same purpose.

This is important because modern secular society implements measures based on scientific understanding. MBCT was first approved for use in the National Health Service in 2004, however, the workplace is a very different context for mindfulness training than therapy in a clinical environment. The key concerns in the workplace are stress and improving performance. Mindfulness in the workplace has different objectives and needs to be taught as training rather than therapy.

The world-view of the clinical psychologist is based on the idea that it is possible to understand a psychological causal process that leads to mental illness. When the process is understood it then becomes possible to devise an intervention with a predictable outcome that can be tested in a clinical trial. It was this world-view that had brought about so much interest in mindfulness but it had also created a “value-neutral” intervention out of mindfulness, just like a drug, to prevent depression.

If mindfulness is merely an intervention to reduce stress, prevent depression or manage anxiety, it is only dealing with the symptoms of the problems we face in society today. If mindfulness helps people to function better in a society that is creating conditions that cause so much unhappiness, it does not change the social conditions that create the problem in the first place.

On the other hand, if mindfulness meditation changes the way people behave then it may have the potential to change society. At the recent Mind and Matter, Mindfulness at Work Conference there were a number of speakers who spoke about mindfulness training in their organisations. There was a common theme: mindfulness was changing corporate culture. Mindfulness training programmes tailored to workplace are changing the way things are done.

Toward “More Humane Organisational Culture”

Mindfulness meditation has a number of psychological effects on the individual. It helps to reduce stress by disengaging attention from thinking and paying attention to moment-to-moment sensory experience. This enables people to relate to their thoughts and feelings differently, react less to difficult feelings and regulate their emotions better. This enables people to respond more thoughtfully in difficult situations and so changes their behaviour.

We react to difficult situations when we feel under threat. This often causes us to act defensively or aggressively and this has a negative effect on our relationships with other people. Strong emotions also interfere with our ability to think clearly and take notice of what is happening around us. Mindfulness helps us to allow difficult feelings pass before we react. This helps us to become more aware of what is happening, think more clearly, make better decisions and respond in ways that maintain better relationships with others around us.

Mindfulness enables us to be more aware of strong emotions, how uncomfortable they can be and to see how we react when we experience them. Mindfulness enables us to dissipate strong emotions before we react. Then we can be more open and aware of what is going on in our own experience in relationships to others, think more clearly, learn from our experience and act more skilfully. With mindfulness, we naturally act with more understanding, kindness and compassion. This is the foundation of ethics.

When we feel under threat, our thoughts and actions can all too easily be driven by an immediate sense of self-interest. When we feel at ease

we are more open and accepting of others around us. With mindfulness, we realise that the way we think about ourselves and others changes in different situations. We discover that our thinking changes as we learn to manage our emotions better. We learn to think about things from more than one perspective and become more accepting of others' views. We become more adaptable as the illusion of a permanent sense of self loses its power over us. This is the foundation of insight.

And this must make good business sense too. Mindfulness in the workplace will not only improve staff wellbeing and improve performance but will create a more humane organisational culture where people can flourish and better fulfill their potential. Cooperation replaces competition. Employee engagement improves as values and vision are shaped by a more humane workplace culture. These changes not only create better working environments but also have an effect on the way people act collectively in an organisation to have an effect on corporate social responsibility.

It is much easier to act with kindness and to think clearly in a social context where these behaviours are part of the cultural environment, which shapes individual experience. We are social beings and mindfulness is as much a social process as it is an individual pursuit. So now with increasing interest in mindfulness in the workplace and wider society, I believe it is time to consider how mindfulness training can become an agent for positive change not just in organisations but across society as a whole.

Mindfulness in the workplace changes organisational culture and the way an organisation acts as a whole. I believe, that the next step needed to make social change take place is to explore ways of making secular mindfulness meditation an everyday part of community life.

Author Biography

Mark Leonard helped to establish the Oxford Mindfulness Centre and was Champion of its 'Mindfulness in the Workplace' Project. He went on to establish its workplace-training spin-out, The Mindfulness Exchange, before working with Mindfulness-4Change, which applies mindfulness meditation as means for social and organisational change. He has led the field in adapting mindfulness, from an evidence-based approach—designed for therapy—to short courses for the workplace and for the general public. His chapter, Making Mindfulness Meaningful and Accessible, is included in a new book on Mindfulness in the Workplace: An Evidence-based Approach to Improving Wellbeing and Maximising Performance, edited by Margaret Chapman-Clarke published by Kogan Page, 2016.