
Thoughts about a personal « Mindfulness » experience

By **Gwendaëlle Kock**

Introduction

At first I eagerly read the *Mindfulness* books of the American Jon Kabat-Zinn. I found that practice quite close to zen : promoting to develop the attention, to be present here and now, to accept what there is, to unify with the body... Besides, it had the advantage to help to sick people.

Mindfulness means : « *To direct one's attention in a particular way; that's to say deliberately, on a requested time, and nonjudgmentally.* » (J. Kabat-Zinn). The MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) for stress reduction, or the MBCT (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy) for the prevention of nervous breakdowns relapses, are programme based on mindfulness. It is inspired by Buddhist meditations but it presents itself as a healing technique without spiritual dimension, (it is getting into a growing number of European hospitals).

At that point I assumed Mindfulness was little bit as a « lay » version of Buddhism. As a zen nun, I found it appropriate to help non-Buddhist people, in order to work in the social sphere while being in harmony with my practice.

Since Mindfulness developed also in the USA schools, I was particularly interested in the role the mindfulness practice had in children education. Nowadays children have indeed major attention troubles (they are referred to as « *the zapping generation* »), which, according to a number of researchers, would be the cause of the ever growing class indiscipline and school poor performances.

So I ended up by signing in the famous « eight weeks » of the MBSR Program... but I didn't make it to the end!

Description of the Mindfulness experience

The group of participants wasn't made of sick people, but of trainers, or people involved in social work. There was thus no special « delirium outbreaks » as it happened in Serge's group (see his experience on the forum). I even often found the comments of the participants extremely relevant.

During these 8 weeks some basic exercises were proposed to do and practise regularly at home, and we met once a week to exchange on our experience and to do further exercises.

The basic exercises

- *Bodyscan* : consisting mostly in putting one's attention (combined with breathing) on all parts of the body, it helps developing attention (mindfulness) and body anchoring.
- *Yoga stretching and postures* enhancing body suppleness and a relaxation state.

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- *Sitting meditation and a walk* consisting in paying attention to all sensations, breathing, thoughts etc. Since their meaning wasn't clarified I assumed it was meant to release ourselves from our thinking process.

Other exercises

Besides those basic exercises, it was proposed during our weekly meetings, what I would call « *New Age psycho-spiritual* » exercises. I am not sure whether all the MBSR programs offer the same training exercises, it seems that the choice depends on the sensitivity of the trainer. These exercises may look attractive, but I found them rather « light » to be a real help for people in difficulty.

For instance there is an exercise where we form a circle and go around each person and end up by joining a person in the centre and look into her eyes, where this person has also been around each person, coming from the other side, and all this is done slowly and in silence. Is this an attention exercise? Is such exercise supposed to enhance our mindfulness? No, really, I looked up for the meaning of this exercise but I still can't see the point of it.

Another example: a role-play exercise where one is put in a conflictual relationship situation with 4 possible scenarios: *victim, escaping (or evading), aggressiveness and flexibility* inspired by aikido. It was hard to act (the context was not appropriate), hence difficult to experience, and all the more the 4 scenarios were already fully written (« staged » by the instructor and given as models). The purpose of the exercise was not very clear, if I got it well we had to understand the merits of flexibility within relationships... I believe escaping is sometimes better, but its proposed scenario was definitely negative! A flexible mind, isn't it what makes one adapt to circumstances rather than acting in an idealistic or dogmatic way?

But what was the point to add that kind of exercises ?! Isn't meditation enough by itself? Doesn't it make one aware of the emptiness of all phenomena and consequently develop a non-set mind, vaster, a « full mind » ?

One should remember that Mindfulness is meant for sick people (especially with breakdowns) and it implies a program bigger than meditation to give a proper support to these fragile people. If I got it right, Mindfulness is a supplementary training for therapists. Indeed practising meditation doesn't make one a good health carer, one needs also to have a thorough medical or psychology background (as far as my trainer was concerned, it wasn't the case, nor was it for the trainer of Serge Rampal's group), in order to use meditation advisedly (some people, for instance, are too fragile to practise) and surround people with proper exercises, « digested » and adapted. I don't put into question the work of Christophe André, head of the movement in France, but the one of some Mindfulness trainers who had no other than meditation.

Mindfulness and zazen

As a zazen practitioner, it was mostly sitting meditation that was a problem for me, since there were very little indications on the posture. When someone asked how one shouldn't follow his thoughts, the trainer couldn't answer. Zazen shows us concretely how to do it: with the body. Just saying: « *Observe your thoughts and see what is there* » is not enough to get out from mental functioning. Likewise for the mindfulness walk, telling someone « *to walk in full awareness by indicating him to pay attention* », seems to me very little to help him achieving it!

« *But well, I told myself, by following the breathing it might work* », but even there... this indication, to me, was not explained well enough.

Because of this very little interest in the posture, there is, I believe, a lack of concentration in Mindfulness meditation. Thus Mindfulness seems to emphasize observation, but this observation is not deep enough, since there isn't the back-and-forth movement between concentration and observation as in zazen.

I am well aware that I am conditioned, to us zazen is awakening itself, and it was obviously difficult to practise something relatively close (sitting posture, walking) without feeling a certain discrepancy, I couldn't help comparing, it happened by itself, even though I had told myself at the beginning of the training, not to do it!

Mushotoku

In my opinion, what Mindfulness meditation mainly lacks is the *mushotoku* mind. In order to develop a vast mind, to get out from our frozen and set thoughts, one needs obviously to be detached from all phenomena. Seeing them is not enough, it is also necessary to stop wanting to grab them (or reject them). In Mindfulness meditation, there is no concept such as *mushotoku*, since it aims at achieving mindfulness in order to recover health or a personal wellbeing. If I remember well, Kabat-Zinn mentioned that in his book (which was not the case in my training), and I also heard a conference of Christophe André where he stressed that one shouldn't be willing to get anything. But to have a *mushotoku* mind in order to heal (even if it is put in the background) is not being *mushotoku* either!

Thus there is a big difference with our Buddha Way, since without this non-profit mind, (indeed rather less appealing and more demanding), we can only stay in delusion and greed. With no letting go there is no possible liberation, and that's the whole meaning of our practice-realization, zazen.

But you are going to tell me that I knew all that from the start, since it was very clear to me that Mindfulness was merely a technique. And its purpose is not liberation, it is to help people to recover or feeling better.

Hence why such discomfort ?

Mindfulness and Buddhism

Actually I think that all this wouldn't be a problem for me if Mindfulness would position itself more clearly in relation to Buddhism, which is far from being the case.

Officially speaking Mindfulness wants to differentiate from Buddhism. Indeed, according to the commitment charter of the MBSR programme, there is a willingness to rely on *experience and practice only, outside any concept, belief, philosophy, etc.*

Today such approach looks paradoxical to me, experience isn't it precisely Buddha Way? Moreover, doesn't Mindfulness make use of the Buddhist practices based precisely on the experience of meditation? Though Mindfulness wants to separate from Buddhism (while referring to it at the same time) to rely solely on experience!!!

It is probably why this separation with Buddhism is not so simple in the facts. In the weekly workshop the instructor used to often quote Buddhism, she took her meditation practice in example (as her retreats). We ought to know that many Mindfulness instructors belong to different Buddhist schools, since to qualify to be a trainer one needs to have experience in meditation. Thus the position of the trainer is rather delicate, it is hard indeed not to connect with one's own Buddhist practice (it was hard for me...) since meditation is a Buddhist practice! It boils down to: how can one teach a practice without really teaching it?

All this is rather ambiguous...

A good example of this ambiguity is that it seems that the Association (French speaking) for the development of Mindfulness, the ADM, (with Matthieu Ricard as honorary member) has applied to be a member of the UBF (Buddhist Union of France). Or at least it was question of it in the reports of the UBF of 6 November 2010, (to this day I don't know whether the ADM became a member or not). It is rather ambiguous for an association that officially presents itself on its website homepage as being « *outside any religious context* » while promoting some Vipassana retreats!

On the other hand, Buddhists also feed this ambiguity: on Wesak 2012, based on the theme of Meditation, Christophe André was invited to give a conference in the Pagode of Vincenne...

Buddhists are presently "surfing" on this popular Mindfulness media coverage, as Mindfulness does in relation to Buddhism, but I am not sure that it benefits one another.

This ambiguity seems problematical for us, since it entails confusion on Buddhism. In the headline of an article in the *Point* of February 5th, Kabat-Zinn is presented as a zen Master! This is misleading for the public. Several people in my training group expressed clearly that the reason why they came was based on a spiritual motivation...

Position of Roland Yuno Rech on Mindfulness

Our Master stands for Mindfulness, at the meeting of the head of dojos at the Grenoble sesshin (8-9 December 2012), he said: « *It is very positive to see the word meditation appearing with a healing label. Indeed, « mindfulness » is to observe and not let negative thoughts engage, and to practise the letting go of zazen. And thus the trauma of a previous suffering can no longer generate a depressive relapse or may even erase it. (...) As Buddhists we should not regret that this meditation is on the market because it can bring benefits, that are in fact « skilful means » to discover another aspect of zazen.* »

Yes indeed, Mindfulness can help people getting better, maybe it reveals another aspect of zazen ... but perhaps it takes away from it. Some people, going through a certain discomfort, come to the dojo (which I think was the reason why many of us started the practice) but now head to Mindfulness. I think it's a pity because sometimes a person, aiming at feeling better, aspires deep down, (without necessarily being aware of it at first) to practise something more than a technique of wellbeing. I'm referring here to the growing number of Mindfulness groups developing outside any medical context, the aim being just wellbeing. But are these groups sufficiently supervised? What is the seriousness of these groups and of their leaders?

Conclusion

Do not think that I am against this method of attention that Mindfulness is. It can -provided practised seriously- help people, allowing them to get some distance with their emotions, pain, etc ... It may open to more awareness and help manage stress better, but it certainly does not release one from the illusion of the self and the suffering it causes.

One could also say that this is precisely the whole difference between Mindfulness and the *religious mind* (in the sense of *religare*: link) of zazen, which through Mushotoku, makes Hishiryo consciousness arise, uniting us with the entire cosmos...

Of course meditation and some exercises tackle few aspects of Buddhism but since the essence of the teaching is not explained, nor practised, to me Mindfulness remains, on the surface and thus has no longer anything to do with it.

This experience also showed me how much a « lay » version of Buddhism was inconsistent. And if Mindfulness doesn't do it, it seems important that we, Buddhists, clarify Buddhism in regard with Mindfulness because this method is itaught in an increasing number of universities, in psychology or medicine (Belgium, England, Switzerland and is starting in France). Certainly, Buddha was considered to be a great doctor, but Mindfulness is fundamentally different from Buddhism, it does not free us and moreover does not pretend to be willing to do it.

So if anyone, like recently, this newcomer in a dojo, tells you that our practice is a bit like Mindfulness, make sure you tell him: our practice helps us but it does much more than that !