

## Mechanisms of Mindfulness

In mindlessness, we are often drawn into our thoughts and feelings. They distract us from, inform, or seem to control our behavior while we, consciously or unconsciously, assume our internal processes to be realistic and true. Through this assumption, we become immersed in or *fused*<sup>[6]</sup> to our internal process. A main practice in mindfulness meditation is to *defuse*<sup>[6]</sup> from our internal experience so that we can observe the *contents of consciousness* (e.g., values, impressions, thoughts, emotions, reasoning, stories about experience). This is a shift from subjective *immersion in* to an objective *perception of* our thoughts, feelings, and sensations. If the mindful observer is able to witness *it*, then she isn't only *it* any longer; she is both the witness and *it*.

Consequently separating our observing awareness from that which we are observing allows us context and distance. In this awareness, our patterns or automatic processes—arising memories, reactions, sensations, etc.—are witnessed as separate phenomena and therefore seem as more transitory, more malleable, and only part of the whole self. For example, when we are in a depressing state, we might encounter thoughts like, “I’m a complete failure” or, “I’m alone in feeling like this.” In many spiritual traditions, realizing that “I am not my thoughts,” and, “There is a witness separate from what I am witnessing,” is the beginning of “awakening” or expanding opportunities for transformation.

Shapiro and Carlson<sup>[3]</sup> coined the term *reperceiving* to describe this disidentification from the contents of consciousness and present it as the most important mechanism of mindfulness. I agree and, further, consider reperceiving as the primary process of mindfulness development. The insight that we are observers separate from our contents of consciousness precedes other phenomenological insights that arise through mindfulness, because the inability to

objectively witness internal processes fundamentally inhibits further insight about those processes. Observing the contents of our consciousness is an origin mechanism for further insight and transformation through mindfulness.

### *An Existing Theory*

Although mindfulness studies have exponentially increased in the past two decades, Holzel et al.<sup>[2]</sup> note the paucity of mindfulness theories integrating existing literature. Shapiro and Carlson<sup>[3]</sup> are two of the few researchers proposing such a theory of how mindfulness develops:

The practice of mindfulness is simply a continuation of the naturally occurring human developmental process whereby one gains an increasing capacity for objectivity about one's own internal experience. [In the] example of a mother's birthday, in which her 8-year-old son gives her flowers and her 3-year-old gives her his favorite toy... the 3-year old is basically caught in the limits of his own self-centered (i.e., narcissistic) perspective... the world is still largely subjective... However, as he develops, a shift in perspective occurs such that there is an ever-increasing capacity to take the perspective of another (e.g., 'my mother's needs are different from mine'), precisely because what was previously subject (identification with the mother) has now become an object that he subsequently realizes he is now separate from (no longer fused with)... [when] individuals are able to shift their perspective away from the narrow and limiting confines of their own personal points of reference, development occurs. (p. 96)

I agree with, and developmental theory supports, Shapiro and Carlson<sup>[3]</sup> in stating these perspective shifts (i.e., the ability to see mother as a separate person or objectively witness one's

thoughts) are part of development. Furthermore, mindfulness practice does encourage the perspective shift of re-perceiving. These are true observations. However, I disagree with the suggestion that "...mindfulness is simply a continuation of the naturally occurring human developmental process..." for two reasons: (1) The shift in perspective allowing for the assumption of another's viewpoint that occurs between three years and six years of age is usual and natural (Piaget, Benack, Fischer), as long as we have "good enough" (Winnicott) parents. However, the shift of perspective allowing us to *mindfully* witness the contents of our consciousness is neither usual nor natural. There is no set age range at which this shift occurs, *if* we are lucky enough for it to occur. Re-perceiving is often imparted through teachings (i.e., Buddhism, yoga, meditation) and practiced at length before it "clicks" or becomes consistent. (2) If the practice of mindfulness only "increases capacity for objectivity about one's own internal experience," then mindfulness cannot yield a *way of knowing* beyond objectivity. Conversely, through *Vipassana* meditation, I've experienced an ineffable way of being and knowing beyond re-perceiving and verbal thinking. I've read and listened to the personal accounts of spiritual teachers and psychotherapists practicing mindfulness, clearly illustrating mindfulness born experiences beyond objectively witnessing their internality.

Shapiro and Carlson<sup>[3]</sup> try, respectably, to distill mindfulness to an explicable line of development—capacity for objectivity—but in doing so they oversimplify. Their reductionism ignores insight beyond observing internal experience, omitting transpersonal or holistic approach to mindfulness. Wilber<sup>[5]</sup> and Wade<sup>[4]</sup>, based on substantial research as well as the writings of various spiritual traditions, including Buddhism—attributed with the beginning of mindfulness<sup>[1]</sup>, represent the opposition to this reductionism, documenting ways of being that transcend objective witnessing of one's experience.

Shapiro and Carlson<sup>[3]</sup> have made grand contributions to the field of mindfulness. I critique this part of their theory to illustrate a point. Attempts to operationalize the process and experience of mindfulness, a way of being that is largely beyond explanation but can be accessed in every moment by any human being, may constrain understanding instead of illuminating. Mindfulness is simple, but often yields grand knowing. Endeavoring to explain how mindfulness *happens* runs into similar barriers as trying to explain a spiritual experience; our abilities to phenomenalyze and “make sense of it” are limited. This is one reason why many spiritual teachers refuse to author books on practice, preferring instead direct, experiential transmission through talks, retreats, and sittings.

If psychologists and spiritual teachers that have decades of mindfulness practice have yet to elucidate how mindfulness works in the psyche or fits in with development, I suggest it is likely to remain veiled. Further, there is nothing that can be conceptualized about *how* it works that can’t be experienced through practice, and I predict mindfulness meditators will encounter more than an “increasing capacity for objectivity.” We can observe the effects of mindfulness (i.e. brain scanning via fMRI) and the ways in which it is useful. However, no theory yet exists sufficiently explaining *how* it works or develops that doesn’t constrain mindfulness as a way of being and isn’t reductionistic of meditation’s myriad potentials and experiences.

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3. Shapiro, S. L., Carlson, L. E. (2009). *The art and science of mindfulness: Integrating mindfulness into psychology and the helping professions*. Washington D.C.: American Psychology Association.
4. Wade, J. (1996). *Changed of mind: A holonomic theory of the evolution of consciousness*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
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