

Democracy & Education

The Politics of Mindfulness

Patrick W. Comstock (Relay Graduate School of Education)

Abstract

Mindfulness is rapidly becoming a mainstream educational intervention. A growing number of schools, colleges, and universities are incorporating mindfulness into the curriculum, and while there is a substantial body of research literature in psychology attesting to the mental and physical benefits of mindfulness, critics of the movement have suggested that mindfulness lacks social and political dimensions. In this article, a response to “Mindfulness, Democracy, and Education,” the author shows why this line of criticism is misguided. Far from being self-centered, asocial, and apolitical, the practice of mindfulness is intrinsically political.

This article is a response to:

Hyde, A., & LaPrad, J. (2015). Mindfulness, democracy, and education. *Democracy & Education*, 23(2), Article 2. Available online at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss2/2>

MINDFULNESS IS ON its way to becoming a mainstream educational intervention. A growing number of American K–12 schools are integrating mindfulness into the curriculum—the epicenter seems to be somewhere around California and Oregon—and the trend shows few signs of slowing. The emergence of mindfulness in schools is in part a function of popular interest in all things mindful (the cover of a recent *Time* magazine proclaimed “The Mindful Revolution”) but also the result of the work of nonprofit organizations like Mindful Schools, which runs professional development programs for teachers. Add to this mix the fact that a growing number of teachers are themselves mindfulness practitioners, and the stage has been set for the mindful classroom. It may be too early yet to gauge empirically the effectiveness of mindfulness as an educational intervention; only a handful of small-scale studies have been done so far, and most have methodological problems, like small sample sizes and lack of a control group. Even so, the early results are suggestive. Mindfulness has been shown to bring about positive changes to students’ stress levels, attention, empathy, and self-control, findings that are consistent with anecdotal reports

from teachers, students, and parents (Black & Fernando, 2013). Interestingly, the benefits of mindfulness appear to extend to teachers as well. A recent study indicated that mindfulness practice reduces teacher burnout, improves the self-regulation of stress, and increases teaching efficacy—no small benefits for overstressed teachers in the era of accountability (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013).

For all its success, the mindfulness movement has had its critics, and one of the most common criticisms is based on an intuitive way of understanding mindfulness. The criticism is this: Mindfulness, because it is a self-directed and self-regarding practice, is self-centered—selfish, even—and, as such, it is a recipe for political quietism and disengagement. Mindfulness, in this view, lacks social and political dimensions. It brings about complacency and acquiescence on the political stage, and its harshest critics consider it to be a form of navel-gazing. Focusing on the self,

PATRICK COMSTOCK is an assistant professor at Relay Graduate School of Education.

the thinking goes, draws people inward, and moves them further away from social and political action.

Hyde and LaPrad (2015) responded to this line of objection convincingly. They showed that, far from inhibiting the democratic ethos, mindfulness actually enhances it. Using theoretical frameworks offered by Dewey and Freire, they pointed out many affinities between mindfulness and democratic values, and their look at three schools in the Coalition of Essential Schools is evidence of the practice's pedagogical and democratic value. My aim in what follows is to make a complementary argument. I hope to further illustrate the conceptual ties between mindfulness and democracy, but my focus will be on one particular claim Hyde and LaPrad made, which is that mindfulness improves the ability to pay attention to our sensations, emotions, and thoughts. They wrote: "Mindfulness allows us to train ourselves in bringing attention to our sensations, emotions, and thoughts, keeping all in balance yet without denial or restriction" (p. 4). My intention is to offer an account of how exactly mindfulness trains attention on thoughts and emotions in a balanced way and to show why heightened attention to thoughts and emotions is relevant to democratic governance. While Hyde and LaPrad drew on Dewey and Freire, I use the framework offered by James (1890/1950), who took a keen interest in teaching and learning, and whose ideas on attention and emotions form the foundation of modern psychological research. The first half of the essay is devoted to attention; the second half takes up the topic of emotions. Overall, I hope to show—along with Hyde and LaPrad—that mindfulness, far from being solipsistic and socially disengaged, is intrinsically political.

A note on mindfulness is necessary at the outset, however. The word is ambiguous. It is used in several different senses, and so it is important to make a few distinctions among the different versions of the concept before setting out. The most common meaning of *mindfulness* is found in the work of Kabat-Zinn (2005), who characterized mindfulness as a special type of awareness: open, accepting, nonjudgmental awareness, centered in the present moment (pp. 108–109). Kabat-Zinn also used the word to refer to a particular style of meditation, mindfulness meditation, usually done while sitting or walking, and mindfulness as a practice is understood to be a method for developing mindfulness as awareness (pp. 108–109).¹ These two senses of mindfulness are slightly different still from the sense of mindfulness found in the Pali Canon, the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings, where mindfulness (*sati* in Pali) is understood not as a quality of awareness but as a function of memory.² The distinction shows up in

1 Kabat-Zinn sometimes described these two forms as "deliberate mindfulness" and "spontaneous mindfulness."

2 See, for example, the *Samyutta Nikaya*, translated by Bhikkhu (2012, p. 9): "And which is the faculty of *sati*? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones has *sati*, is endowed with excellent proficiency in *sati*, remembering & recollecting what was done and said a long time ago. He remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & having *sati*—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves. . . . the mind in & of itself. . . . mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & having *sati*—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This is called the faculty of *sati*."

grammatical terms: the adjective *mindful* is used both transitively and intransitively. Sometimes the word takes an object, as when so-and-so is being mindful of the time or the number of napkins used; at other times, one is mindful simpliciter, without there being the need for a *particular* thought or object to be kept in mind.

The practice I focus on here, mindfulness of breathing, involves mindfulness in both senses, and in many contemporary mindfulness instructions, the distinction is mostly a matter of emphasis. The basic task of the mindfulness of breathing is to focus on the sensation of the breathing process. The skill being practiced is the skill of paying attention to how the breathing process feels. Because the breathing process occurs in the present moment, focusing on individual breaths as they come and go necessarily means maintaining a present-centered, high-quality awareness, of the sort Kabat-Zinn (2005) described. Because focusing on the breathing process for any length of time requires continually *remembering* to pay attention to it, mindfulness as memory—the sense found in the Pali Canon—is involved as well.

One of the remarkable features of breathing is that it is one of the few bodily processes that is both automatic and also under our conscious control. We do not have to remember to breathe, fortunately, thanks to specialized areas in the brain stem, but when we want to, we can deliberately adjust our breathing, and the adjustment brings about a change in mental state, however subtle. Breathing occupies a nexus between mind and body—a fact evident in the advice given to anyone who is about to give a big speech or undertake some other activity likely to rattle the nerves: Take a few deep breaths. What the strategy consists of is using the mind to calm the body—to calm the mind. At a basic level, the practice of mindfulness of breathing can be understood as doing this strategy for an extended period of time.

Taking Possession by the Mind

In order to see how mindfulness trains attention on sensations, emotions, and thoughts, and in order to see how heightened attention is relevant to democratic governance, I start with the idea of attention itself. The most influential early theorist of attention was James (1890/1950), who devoted an entire chapter of his classic work *The Principles of Psychology* to the subject. "Everyone knows what attention is," he wrote. "It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, and consciousness are of its essence" (pp. 403–404). Here James pointed out that attention entails selectivity; it means intentionally focusing on or directing awareness to a single object or train of thought from among many possible others. And while James distinguished among many different forms of attention in his chapter, perhaps the most important distinction he made was between passive and voluntary attention. Passive attention is immediate and unwilling, as when we automatically turn and look at the source of a sudden loud sound. But we have the capacity to voluntarily direct attention, and this capacity, for James, is of utmost importance—"the very root of judgment, character, and will," he wrote (p. 424). In fact, James suggested that an education centered on voluntarily directing attention would be *the* education

par excellence, and, as Hyde and LaPrad pointed out, mindfulness, since it requires voluntarily directing attention on a fundamental level, seems to fit the bill.

In contemporary psychology, there is no agreement on how to define *attention* and no agreement on how exactly it works, but one of the most influential models of attention is the functional component model, where attention is thought to consist of three distinct mental functions: alerting, or responding to a new stimulus in the environment; orienting, which means selecting one object of attention from among others; and executive attention (also called executive functioning), which refers to the higher-order management-type functions of attention, like planning, monitoring conflicts, and solving problems (Posner & Peterson, 1990, pp. 25–42). Executive attention is a metaphor—there is no “executive center” in the brain—but it is a metaphor worth considering in more detail.³ The role of an executive is to carry out—to *execute*—decisions, and what makes the job difficult is that there are many competing interests to be heard. The very idea of executive attention, then, assumes that the mind is not a unitary agent; it has many impulses, beliefs, desires, and habits, all jostling for control. To take the idea of executive attention seriously is to conceive of the mind as more like a committee or an unruly city council than a single agent. This sort of idea is an old one and can be traced back at least as far as Plato, who, through Socrates, offered the image of the tripartite soul, where spirit and the appetites wrestle for power with reason, the original executive functioning. If the mind has its own politics, then mindfulness can be understood as intentionally transferring power to the mind’s chief executive.

The fact that attention is so closely tied to judgment, character, and will, as James (1890/1950) said, means there is a close connection between attention and identity. How we pay attention, and what we pay attention to, shapes the people we are—and this is especially true when it comes to paying attention to our own thinking habits. This principle is illustrated vividly in Murdoch’s (1970) essay “The Idea of Perfection.” Murdoch asked us to imagine a mother-in-law (M) who dislikes her daughter-in-law (D). M thinks that D is juvenile, unsophisticated, and unpolished. She feels that her son has married beneath him. Now, it could be that, over time, M’s view of D solidifies, such that she settles down with a hardened sense of grievance. But what Murdoch pointed out is the possibility that her attitude can evolve. She may soften her view to become more accepting of her daughter-in-law, so that what was once tiresomely juvenile comes to be seen as youthful and refreshingly simple. This transformation in M can occur even without contact between the women, and, as Murdoch pointed out, it is the result of a shift in attention. It comes about through a reflective process by which M examines—really looks into—her own attitudes and assumptions about D. Murdoch described the contents of M’s mental life perceptively: “M tells herself: I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced

3 Research in neuroscience has shown that the prefrontal cortex—the brain region in humans to have evolved most recently—is most heavily involved in “executive” tasks like planning, monitoring conflicts, and solving problems. But the brain is a massively decentralized organ, and to say that one area is *most* involved is not to say that other areas are not *also* involved.

and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again” (p. 17).

Murdoch’s (1970) story perfectly illustrates the mechanics of the “mental scripts” that Hyde and LaPrad (2015) referred to—mental shortcuts that, in the most pernicious cases, “see different others as the competition or the enemy” (p. 3). Using James’s (1890/1950) framework, M is voluntarily directing her attention to her own thought processes and, in particular, to her own prejudices and biases with respect to D. The claim that I make is that mindfulness practice opens up space for precisely this sort of critical self-reflection. It affords the opportunity to submit one’s own thoughts and beliefs to more careful scrutiny. When it comes to mindfulness of breathing, for example, in the course of focusing on what it feels like to breathe, over time one gains a sharpened sense of the mental events that interrupt one’s focus. Through mindfulness practice, the habits of the discursive mind become easier to see, and the process of attention substitution becomes more apparent, the process by which one object of attention is replaced by another—a process so subtle that it usually flies under the radar of conscious awareness.⁴

What is remarkable about the story of M and D is that it is a story in which an apparently self-centered activity—critical self-reflection—has a direct and immediate social impact, assuming that M’s change in view will bring about a change in behavior toward D. A practice that seems at first glance to be exclusively self-regarding has hidden social dimensions. The same sort of reasoning, I want to suggest, holds true at the political level. At the heart of democracy is a commitment to the equal worth of persons and to the idea that every voice carries the same weight. What this means is that getting anything accomplished politically entails working together, striving to understand the views of others, keeping the common good in mind, and maintaining the willingness to confront and revise one’s own views. None of this is easy to do, and it means that democracy is an extremely demanding ideal. But because mindfulness practice develops these qualities of mind—including openness to new ideas and the mental flexibility required to see things from another’s point of view—it can be seen as an asset to democratic governance.

Embodied Emotions

The idea that I turn to next is the idea that mindfulness trains the ability to pay attention to emotions. In order to see the relationship between mindfulness and emotions, and in order to see the way in which attention to emotions is relevant to democratic governance, it will be helpful to start with the nature of emotions. The commonsensical way of understanding emotions is that emotions are primarily states of mind. To have an emotion is to feel a certain way. In his chapter devoted to emotions, James (1890/1950) characterized the commonsensical view like this: “Common-sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike” (pp. 449–450). But James asked us to abandon the commonsense view. The problem is that it has the order of operations backward. It is the body that reacts

4 For more on the idea of attention substitution, see Bruya (2010).

first, he said, and the mental events associated with an emotion follow from and are conditioned by the body. The real order of operations is this: “We feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble” (p. 450). An emotion separated from the body, then, is no emotion at all.

If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no ‘mind stuff’ out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains. (p. 451)

Understanding emotions as embodied positions us to see how mindfulness practice affects emotions. In the case of mindfulness of breathing, where a basic instruction is to breathe in an easeful, calming way—a way that alleviates areas of tension and tightness in the body—it is obvious that the practice has a direct impact on the body, which is the basis of emotions, according to James (1890/1950). Writing more than a century after James, Shusterman (2007) offered a helpful term to describe the sort of awareness developed through body-based mindfulness practices: *somatic self-awareness*, or awareness centered in the body. And in the natural sciences, the term *proprioception* is used to refer to the sense of how the body feels from the inside. In each case, the basic idea is that by gaining a sharpened sense of how the body feels from the inside, it is possible to acquire the ability to willfully manipulate and regulate the experience of emotions.

One of the peculiar things about emotions is that they are, at least to a certain extent, contagious. A person might feel joyful because people around her are expressing joy, or panicky because others are panicking. In psychology, this phenomenon is called emotional contagion theory; the intuitive idea is that emotions tend to spread around. Many explanations have been offered to account for the contagiousness of emotions, including one centered on mirror neurons, the significant overlap between the brain areas that are activated when we observe another person’s action and those that are activated when we perform the same action ourselves. However the contagiousness of emotions might be explained, a major implication is that, so long as are living with other people, emotions have an intrinsically social dimension.

But there are further reasons for thinking that the emotional awareness and regulation developed through mindfulness practice is beneficial to the democratic process. It is reasonable to think that elected representatives who are able to regulate their emotions are more likely to work effectively with others and more likely to be able to see issues from different points of view—major assets to the democratic process. And at the grassroots level, people who can regulate their own emotions and reflect on their own biases are ideal members of a participatory democracy. This principle comes out clearly in the case of nonviolent political activism. A successful nonviolent demonstration entails staying cool, calm, and collected under pressure, and if staying cool, calm, and collected under pressure is a skill developed through mindfulness practice, then there is a direct link between mindfulness practice and successful political activism. Indeed, there are many historical precedents for a

link of this sort, including Mahatma Gandhi (1961), whose philosophy of *satyagraha* was based on the idea that activists must first work on themselves in order to be successful on the political stage. For Gandhi, political activism and spiritual practice were two sides of the same coin. In this light, many of the worries about mindfulness leading to political quietism and disengagement can be put to rest by simply by looking around and seeing that practitioners of yoga, mindfulness, and meditation are among the most politically active citizens. As Hyde and LaPrad (2015) noted, “Engaging in local social action is quite compatible with a personal mindfulness practice and is the norm among yoga and mindfulness organizations” (p. 6). In a political climate marked by demonstrations over the killings of unarmed black and brown Americans by police officers, the emotional awareness and regulation developed through mindfulness practice is no trivial benefit.

Conclusion

In this essay I focused on one claim made by Hyde and LaPrad (2015), which is that mindfulness practice trains attention on thoughts and emotions. Using a framework offered by James (1890/1950), I tried to illustrate the mechanisms by which mindfulness does this, and I tried to show how the ability to pay attention to one’s own thoughts and emotions enhances the democratic ethos. The picture of mindfulness that has emerged is that of a radically empowering practice, for it is a practice that equips people with the skills to regulate their own attention and emotions. This means we should not be surprised if mindfulness does not get much support from those in power, for those in power have an interest in preventing those who are not from becoming too independent, too creative, and too insightful. But such shifts in power may be a vital part of the effort to restore an ailing democracy back to health.

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