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Mindfulness Meditation and the Perception of Beauty: Implications for an Ecological Well-Being

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Abstract

Meditation is a first-person method for contemplating ourselves and the world, with more than 2500 years of history, rooted in the philosophical and contemplative traditions of the east. The present chapter aims to explore this worldview in order to demonstrate its relevance to our capacity for the appreciation of beauty. To this end, the aesthetic experience, the contemplative experience and their relationship with the practice of mindfulness are analysed. We suggest that the contemplative meditative experience bestows a state of consciousness and acceptance of life which places the practitioner in a progressive encounter with a self-concept that begins to detach from a static sense of the self and from the categories that define it, so that it may be experienced as an ongoing mental event, removed from cultural ideals of beauty or positivity. The result of this de-identification from the static self is a greater degree of psychological flexibility and a more genuine way of seeing the world, leading to a new perception of the self that is connected to an experience of freedom, and contributes to one's own well-being, as well as to that of others and of the environment.

Keywords: aesthetic experience, contemplative experience, mindfulness meditation, self

1. Introduction

In order to understand the link between meditative practice and the perception of beauty, one must explore the worldview that can be achieved through mindfulness. Meditation is a first-person method for contemplating ourselves and the world, with more than 2500 years of history, rooted in the philosophical and contemplative traditions of the east. The present chapter aims to explore this worldview in order to demonstrate its relevance to our capacity for the appreciation of beauty.

The concept of mindfulness has become the focus of increasing scientific and clinical attention over the last few decades. This appears to stem from the fact that until now, 'psychological science has conventionally focused in one way or another on the contents of consciousness (cognitions, emotions, and their somatic and behavioural consequences), mindfulness fundamentally concerns consciousness itself' [1]. The central theme, as per Kabat-Zinn's definition [2], is 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally'. The capacity to sustain awareness of the observed process in the present moment is central to the psychological state associated with mindfulness. In other words, mindfulness is the active component of the mind within a meditative state [3]. It is common within meditative practice to focus on breathing as the principle medium and point of entry to the psychological state associated with mindfulness.

Mindfulness is rooted within oriental contemplative traditions, especially Buddhism. According to Davis [4], 'Buddhist meditation practices encourage concentration, clarity, and the cultivation of calm and positive ways of being as a way of life'. The long contemplative tradition that began with Siddhartha Gautama, who would eventually be known as the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, facilitates a profound and sophisticated understanding of the mind and of human existence. Upon reaching enlightenment, the Buddha spoke of Four Noble Truths: the first is that life is suffering (*dukkha*), the second Noble Truth is that the origin and cause of this suffering is desire or yearning (*taṇhā*), the third Truth claims that this suffering may end and the fourth Noble Truth claims that a path exists to achieve the end of suffering. That path, known in the Buddhist tradition as the Noble Eightfold Path, involves eight attitudinal and behavioural practices, which, if followed, lead to freedom from human suffering. One of them, known as *sāmmā sati* in Pali (the language spoken by the Buddha), and which is usually translated as *right mindfulness*, is the practice of mindfulness meditation.

The earliest scriptures on Buddhism, specifically the *Mahāsatiipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, describe the concept, its characteristics and practice in detail [5]. Davis [4] points out that 'in accordance with the Buddhist philosophy, taking responsibility of our state of mind is the most important thing we can do to free ourselves of human suffering'. The great achievement of the Buddha lies in the fact that he identified the central cause of human suffering, which is the fact that we are permanently yearning to achieve a different state to the one that we are currently in or, on the other hand, that we reject the states of discomfort in which we may find ourselves.

Research has shown how this inherent state of human nature is at the root of many psychopathological conditions, especially depression [6]. The aim of mindfulness meditation is for us to develop the capacity to use our senses to pay attention non-judgementally, both directly and immediately, to what is happening in our body, mind and surroundings, in the present moment. This serves to counteract the ruminative and phobic attitudes that underlie many mental health conditions. Despite being rooted in Buddhist practices, mindfulness may be practised by anyone, regardless of their religious or spiritual background. It is possible to go so far as to claim that mindfulness develops the capacity to leave states of automatic mental functioning, in order to examine systematically the way in which we are and the way we live, as well as reviewing our place within the world [2].

2. Idea of the aesthetic experience

The idea of beauty has enjoyed a privileged status amongst humanity. Philosophy and the arts have concerned themselves with the idea of beauty for millennia. Ethics and aesthetics are grouped into one of the four great branches of pure philosophy. It is beyond the reach of this chapter to provide an in-depth discussion on the relationship between beauty, aesthetics and art; however, we may note, along with Danto, that it is not possible to reduce the idea of beauty purely to the aesthetic, nor to say that aesthetics do not form a part of art, or that art does not need to be understood necessarily as beautiful [7].

Neither do we intend to carry out an exhaustive tour of all the thinkers who have considered the theme of beauty and its perception. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this chapter, it is relevant to look at some of their ideas in order to understand the place of mindfulness and how this relates to the perception of the aesthetic qualities of the world. Our goal—more than pointing out or exploring the definitions of beauty, aesthetics or art—is to give an account of what has become known as the aesthetic experience and how this is intertwined with the contemplative experience.

Simone Weil's statement that, beauty is that which can be contemplated. What is beautiful is something to which attention may be paid [8], appears to anticipate that a universe exists to be explored within the process of paying attention, as occurs in mindfulness and the aesthetic experience. She goes on to claim that, 'whoever does not possess that degree of attention will one day receive that capacity if they persist with humility, perseverance and patience, and if they are driven by an unalterable and violent desire' [8], an asseveration which is strikingly descriptive of the meditative process of mindfulness.

In the following section, we will focus on the three moments of universal philosophy to give an account of the evolution of the idea of beauty and the way in which it is perceived.

2.1. Plato and elements of the aesthetic experience

The legacy of platonic thought on beauty and its perception is of incommensurable value. Plato never developed an aesthetic, as such [9], but the ideas that he developed in *Hippias Major*, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* focus explicitly on aesthetic themes. In the literature, it is common to find the caricature that the platonic idea of beauty is the good and the truthful. According to Beyer [9], Plato distinguishes three levels of beauty: (a) beauty of the body (physical beauty, health, wealth, etc.), as described in *Hippias Major*; (b) beauty of the soul, such as virtue, as described in *Phaedrus* and (c) beauty of 'wisdom', as synthesised in *Symposium*.

In short, we can argue that for Plato, supreme beauty is housed within the idea of good and truth, incorporating within it beauties of lesser worth, such as those of the senses and the soul. It is needless to point out how this notion of beauty has permeated western culture from its very roots onwards. In fact, Aristotle, the stoics, Epicureans, Seneca and, later on, Plotinus, to differing extents correlate beauty with good, truth and usefulness.

To our judgement, a distinction between the beautiful and the good—as determined by subjective experience at the moment of experiencing a phenomenon—does appear to exist: that is

the fact that the beautiful appears beautiful, even though it does not belong to me, whereas the good is something that I desire; I want it. For example, if we were to imagine a thirsty person who comes across a beautiful stream with water in it, that person is highly unlikely to stop to observe the beauty of that water but will simply drink from it to quench his thirst. Nonetheless, the water running in the stream will continue to appear beautiful to the eyes of that person, even if nobody drinks from it. Thus, the feeling of beauty is independent from the feeling of desire. This notion brings us to the philosophy of Kant and his idea of beauty and the sublime.

2.2. Kant and the aesthetic experience

The great contribution of Kant to aesthetic contemplation can be found in his *Critique of Judgement* [10] and lies in the notion that it is selfless. For Kant, the observation of something that is beautiful does not bestow any benefit; pleasure arises only from the act of observing something that is beautiful. He states that the contemplation of beauty is a source of pleasure, but it is a pleasure that does not lie in the idea of possessing the object of our contemplation, which is also universally recognised as being beautiful.

Bayer [9] describes this notion as follows: beauty is that which produces a universally shared pleasure. Kant in his *Critique of Judgement* proposes that, alongside the faculties for knowing and desiring, there is a third faculty, which is that of judging. He claims that an aesthetic experience is an encounter that happens within the subject. The faculty of aesthetic judgement, or of perceiving and analysing beauty, does not know or desire; its dimension is purely subjective and is expressed as a feeling of pleasure or disgust, and it is not a cognitive experience. Only through the aforementioned feelings does it perceive the nature of phenomena. For Kant, such a feeling is universal. An object that is judged to be beautiful will be perceived as such by all observers and will be universally communicable.

Two aspects of mindfulness are of particular relevance to the contributions that mindfulness can bring to the aesthetic experience. The first is that beauty has nothing to do with that which is good or pleasing, due to the fact that these belong to the realm of desire. Mindfulness, on the other hand, is opposed to desire. Furthermore, beauty is also unrelated to that which is 'useful and perfect' [9], in the sense that beauty does not pursue a transcendental goal. Beauty is immanent to the beautiful being and lacking in metaphysics. Kantian thought, in many ways, is far removed from the traditional contemplative vision that we attempt to explore in this chapter; however, we can argue that, for Kant, the aesthetic experience does not desire or yearn to arrive anywhere other than where it already is, as is also the case in mindfulness.

The second strand of Kant's thought that appears to be especially relevant to the ideas that we aim to explore in this chapter is that beauty, as an experience, does not transcend beyond the immediate. It cannot occur outside of, or beyond, the pleasure that is experienced in the moment [11]. Furthermore, the bodily sensations that he relates to pleasure, health and well-being have 'no purpose whatsoever' [11]. This shares similarities with the Buddhist notion that mental events are lacking in inherent meaning and that to practise the capacity for focussing attention on the present moment or, as Gunaratana [12] puts it, of being an observer who disappears, leaving in his absence the pure act of observation, represents the quintessence of how the contemplative traditions regard the emergence of aesthetic experiences.

2.3. Heidegger and elements of aesthetic experience

A third author who cannot be ignored in the relationship between modern philosophy and the contemplative experience is Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Needless to say, we cannot explore his entire body of work nor all of his philosophical propositions, but we will consider the part of his philosophy that has become known as the ‘second Heidegger’ [13] and, more specifically, two texts that consider the aesthetic experience: *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935–1936) and *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry* (1937).

In the second Heidegger, a new metaphysics arises, a turning point to which Heidegger would return again and again to discuss the issue of forgetfulness of being, the human tendency to think from the entity, instead of the being. In later texts, starting from the idea of the being, Heidegger explores concepts that share a deep similarity with oriental ideas such as emptiness, serenity and silence. It is beyond the reach of this chapter to provide an in-depth exploration of these ideas. Nonetheless, starting from this concept of the self, we can review his idea of the aesthetic experience, as it unfolds in *The Origin of the Work of Art* and *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry*. The central argument in both texts is that art and beauty are spaces where truth is manifested, or, in other words, beauty is the ‘instauration of the being and of the truth’ [14]. But what does Heidegger mean with this idea? For him, truth is nothing less than the discovery of the being; truth manifested in beauty is not a property of logical judgement, as argued by Kant, but it is the primary manifestation of the being. Heidegger names this process, in which beauty is capable of revealing the being, *alétheia*, which can be understood as revelation or disclosure. De la Vega describes the process as follows: ‘Truth, then, is given first in a separate dimension from understanding. And, according to Heidegger’s aesthetic theory, the essence of the work of art is to place in truth a being, to disclose its truth’ [15]. In our interpretation, for Heidegger, the αἴσθησις (aisthesis) is direct perception, such as it is understood in classical Greek philosophy, and, in that sense, the aisthesis, or direct perception, ‘discovers’ something, revealing the ontological nature of beings. This is not an intellectual process (noesis), but more accurately one that is opposed to it. That is why De la Vega claims that aisthesis is inseparable from the truth [15]. Heidegger himself succinctly argues: ‘Beauty is one of the ways of presenting the truth as disclosure’ [16]. He also states that in the process of *alétheia*, something is illuminated, the being of the entities can be observed thanks to the capacity to perceive beings directly.

It is worth pointing out that numerous authors from the past and present centuries who have made enormous contributions to the development of the idea of an aesthetic experience rooted in philosophy, art and artistic production remain overlooked in this chapter, for example, Dewey (1859–1952), Beardsley (1915–1985), Danto (1924–2013) and Shustermann (1949).

3. Idea of the contemplative experience

What do we mean when we talk about the contemplative experience? Just as the name suggests, the contemplative experience is an experience. Therefore, it is something that is lived and experienced. It is something that we undertake, and that simultaneously happens to us.

It is something that emanates from us and that returns to us. As the central psychological state of the contemplative experience, mindfulness is a vehicle through which this experience occurs. Lira refers to a central aspect of the contemplative attitude and the capacity to grasp beauty. He states that 'beauty is not seen when one is asleep, identified with pleasure or pain, when one is not paying attention and not concentrating, when the mind passes mechanically from one object to another without stopping, when it looks without seeing' [5].

From the Buddhist contemplative tradition, and especially Zen Buddhism, aesthetic observation arises from central philosophical ideas, such as dhyâna (contemplation), sūnyatā (emptiness), anattā (non-self) and nirvâna (illumination).

3.1. Dhyâna

Contemplation (dhyâna) is central to Buddhism. To stop, calm the mind and observe in silence the flow of mental and bodily states and those of the world around us, is the most distinctive act of mindfulness. Aesthetic and artistic contemplation, especially of nature, in the process of seeking illumination is relevant to Buddhism. Lomas [17] states that 'in Zen, art is regarded as a particularly potent way of communicating spiritual truths, indeed, far more so than discursive prose. Zen constantly seeks to eschew and overcome the limitations of conceptual thought, and to "point directly" into the "suchness" (i.e. nature) of reality'.

3.2. Śūnyatā

The idea of the void is central in Buddhism, especially in Zen. Śūnyatā (in Sanskrit) or kuu' (Japanese) has been translated as emptiness or voidness. It is a concept which is not related to being empty in the sense of not having any contents. In Buddhism, the nature of the human mind and of all phenomena is emptiness, meaning that its nature is empty. It is the notion that nature is beyond our ability to perceive with our senses and our ability to conceptualise. It conveys a sense of possibility that all can be overcome or everything can happen. Nothing exists, except in interrelationship with everything else. Stated differently, when we speak of emptiness, we do not mean nothingness but, to the contrary, an unlimited potential to appear, change, relate or disappear. Given that the nature of our mind is emptiness, we possess the capacity to experience an unlimited variety of thoughts, emotions and sensations. The Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes the idea of substance as a central concept in Western thought. He states that it is constitutive of the unity and selfness of the being. For Byung-Chul Han [18], substance 'rests in separation and distinction... thus, substance is not oriented towards openness, but to closure'.

He points out that this notion of emptiness 'does not constitute an originary principle, a first cause from which another being arises' [18]. He adds that the emptiness in Zen Buddhism is not situated at a higher ontological level than that of the forms that appear (the entities, as Heidegger would call them), but that they are placed in the same level of the self.

From this notion of emptiness that develops through the practice of mindfulness meditation, we may learn that the contemplative experience is a sort of substrate for acquiring a mind that is 'empty', available and full of all of the possibilities that emerge from reality and the aesthetic experience.

3.3. Anattā

The concept of anattā, or non-self, of Buddhism is also an inherent concept within contemplative practice and specifically within mindfulness. Anattā is the notion that the self is an illusion. This idea is profoundly linked to another Buddhist concept, the anicca, which represents the impermanence of things. Existence is in a permanent state of transformation; everything is always on its way to becoming something else. Starting from the idea that things are in a constant state of flux, the assumption of an immutable state for things, for existence, and even for oneself, becomes an impossibility. Meditative practice, in its fluctuation, allows for the meditator to come to terms with the certainty that the 'me' is relative. It is a natural consequence of mindfulness practice for the 'me' to become ever smaller and situated in ever greater and less egocentric contexts. Intertwining these reflections with the idea of an aesthetic experience allows us to consider how mindfulness contributes to the dissolution of the 'me/object' duality or, in other words, of the illusion that the observer of something beautiful is located on the other side, in relation to what is observed. From this perspective, regarding the aesthetic experience, we can argue that, as the 'me' becomes diluted to make way for contemplation, the phenomena that we are observing can be expressed in all their beauty and intensity. If the self is removed from its role as protagonist, beauty can become manifested in an absolute and sublime form and can be perceived in all its dimensions. This change in the relationship with oneself and the world is conducive to a greater degree of psychological flexibility, brought about by a diminishing self-referential process, which allows us to merge completely with the observed object, relaxing the borders of the self in order to perceive completely the object that arises before our senses. In this way, we do not identify with an aesthetic experience, but we contemplate the experience from a non-judgemental platform, with openness and curiosity, allowing for the nature of things to be grasped by being more sensitive to the aesthetic experience, situated in the present moment, open to the new and free from prior conditioning and the habits of prejudice.

3.4. Nirvāna

Finally, we arrive at one of the most profound concepts associated with the meditative practice of mindfulness, and with contemplative traditions as a whole, which is the concept of nirvāna. We can argue that all of Buddhism centres on the idea of nirvāna. This is usually translated as illumination. In Japanese, within the Zen tradition, the word that is used to describe the concept is satori. Illumination represents clarity about the nature of existence. It is the state in which the suffering nature of our existence gives way to tranquillity and equanimity, brought about by a deep understanding of the futility of the existence of all things. To approach and achieve nirvāna is the ultimate goal of contemplative practices. This is where we may observe the beautiful congruence between the concepts of contemplative experience and aesthetic experience.

The role that aesthetic contemplation plays in reaching nirvana is undisputed. For example, in Zen Buddhism, the contemplation of iconographic art along with the nembutsu (described further along) is one of the essential practices on the path to illumination [19]. These practices seek to sooth the mind from emotional injury and direct it towards a state of concentration

and attention. The continuous practice of these exercises enables the practitioner to let go of intellectualised methods of processing perceptual stimuli and to reduce the tendency to grasp reality in a preconceived fashion, stained by our prejudices and previous experience, allowing one to pay attention to internal and external phenomena precisely in the way that they are presented. Thus, we avoid our mind's inclination to see the world as the mental projection that we have of it. For Siegel [20], mindfulness brings with it the dissolution of the influence of prior learning from the sensation of the present.

Relevance is worth highlighting that *nembutsu* brings to beauty and aesthetic contemplation, especially to the beauty that can be found within the natural world. Examples of this include the first visualisations described in these exercises: the contemplation of the sun descending towards sunset, the contemplation of running water and the observation of the earth or of trees. Another example, used by Vargas to clarify the role of the aesthetic experience on the path to *nirvāna* is that of the monk Hui-yūan (334–416), who considered the contemplation of the natural world and its beauty to have a central place in the search for *nirvāna*. Han [18], himself, in *Philosophy of Zen Buddhism*, argues that, 'contemplating the landscape exhaustively does not mean to capture it completely. To grasp an object completely means to take total power over it. To the contrary, contemplating the landscape exhaustively means to sink oneself in it, separating one's view from oneself. He who contemplates does not have the landscape as an object that is outside of him. It would be more correct to say that he merges with the landscape'.

4. Contemplation of the self

We have seen how contemplative experience through mindfulness meditation allows one to have an aesthetic experience of things in this world as a direct perception, grounded in the immediate and free of prejudice and of conceptual thought. Therefore, the mindful state brings us closer to an aesthetic experience by contemplating things just as they are, without staining them with our past experience or future expectations. However, this process is not simple, due to the changing nature of our minds and our tendency to evaluate and label everything around us as an adaptive function of making the world more predictable and manageable.

Mindfulness meditation is a form of mental training, in which practitioners learn to centre their attention on external and internal sensory stimuli, with a non-critical awareness that is centred on the present, with an attitude of compassion, interest, openness and kindness [21]. It can be divided into two essential methods: focused attention meditation and open monitoring meditation of the experience of the present moment [22]. The first requires mental training to focus on a particular object and thus achieve a state of relaxation and mental calm. The second involves first-person observation of the working of the mind itself. In open monitoring meditation, the meditator examines carefully the different aspects of his or her own existence and trains him or herself in gaining awareness of the immediate experience.

In this way, Buddhist practice is considered an ongoing investigation into reality, and specifically meditation teaches us to contemplate our perceptual processes with great precision,

allowing us to avoid observing through our preconceived ideas of reality. The aim is to transcend the conceptual mind, which is understood as the tendency of the mind to focus with anticipation on any object, imposing a vision of reality that ends up getting confused with the experience itself. In contrast, the contemplative perception of reality allows us to access a real perception of ourselves and to abandon any preconceived notion about what we think we are [23].

Let us try, then, to explain how mindfulness meditation works, as regards contemplation of oneself. By observing ourselves internally, we generate the perception of a self that appears constant and static in time, creating the illusion of permanence. However, through meditative practice it is possible to observe with clarity the contents of our awareness and realise that such contents are constantly appearing and disappearing. In this way, little by little, the practitioner becomes unattached from a static sense of the self, experiencing it, instead as a series of mental events [24]. This process involves metacognitive awareness [25], that is, a form of subjective experience and executive monitoring, in which a nonconceptual perspective is assumed as a form of attention distributed to the contents of the conscious experience and the processes that this involves [26, 27], which allows the contents of the experience to be observable for the mediator. This allows one to assume a detached perspective on the contents of awareness, known as decentering [28]—a psychological capacity that allows us to realise the transitory nature and the impermanent character of the things that we perceive.

4.1. Change in relation to our experience

Upon beginning the practice of meditation, we realise how disconnected we are from our experience. We could be eating, but our mind is busy with what we have to do later on at work. This disassociation between awareness and experience is a regular habit amongst us and is what meditation attempts to change by facilitating a specific type of awareness, which consists in being aware of that which happens in the present moment [29]. This type of awareness also involves bodily awareness, one of the starting points of Buddhist teaching, which includes paying attention to breathing and bodily sensations. Thus, practitioners of mindfulness claim that the practice of paying attention to the present moment gives way to a greater awareness of bodily states and greater interoceptive perceptual clarity [30], which translates into a greater awareness of the organism's response to an emotional stimulus, leading to enhanced awareness of emotionality itself [31].

This process involves a change in the relationship that we establish with our bodily selves, learning to be aware of the process of perceiving and of the sensations associated with each experience. This implies that 'there is not an abstract knower of an experience that is separated from the experience itself' but instead one 'is at one with the experience' [31]. This form of being in the present brings with it a number of benefits, such as improving certain cognitive capacities [32, 33], including the memory of work [34, 35] and attentional processes [36, 37], as well as increasing the cognitive and emotional flexibility of individuals [38]. It also results in a strategy of emotional regulation [30], which demonstrates effectiveness in the reduction of symptomatology [39], and an increase in positive mood states [40] and in psychological well-being [41].

5. Towards a new perception of the self: the contribution of mindfulness to the well-being of oneself, others and the environment

Thus far, we have reviewed various concepts in order to explore the links between meditative practice and the perception of beauty. Specifically, we have considered the aesthetic experience, the contemplative experience and their relationship with the practice of mindfulness. Now, we would like to summarise all these elements into the following questions: how can we understand the relationship between meditative practice and the perception of beauty? And what are the implications of this for the person, his or her relationships and the environment?

We live in a culture that bombards us with endless stimuli and external demands to which we are compelled to respond with urgency. This maelstrom makes it difficult to find moments of silence in which to be with oneself and to be aware of one's surroundings. Specifically, this lifestyle has made us more likely to favour responding to external stimuli over our own internal processes. In general, westerners do not receive any kind of formal learning about practices that allow us to be with ourselves or that explicitly develop socioemotional abilities from childhood [42]. This impacts our perception of the things that happen to us, to others and to our environment.

As has already been pointed out, perception is intimately related to attention (for a review, see Ref. [43]). Previously in this text, we have stated that beauty is something to which attention can be paid, that is to say that it requires the development of a certain degree of attention and one of the central elements within mindfulness is attentional control. This is the first element to be considered; in order to perceive beauty, we must train our capacity for attention, which is something that mindfulness does. By strengthening our attention, the practice of mindfulness allows us to stop in the middle of our daily business, to focus our attention and to leave aside other emerging stimuli.

Another element that has been considered in this chapter is the question of beauty; that is to say, how do we understand beauty? In this sense, we identify with the Kantian idea that beauty is not related to goodness or pleasantness nor with that which is good or perfect, as Plato suggested. To this end, Kant separates from the dominion of beauty the idea of goodness as something that is desired. This element is central from two perspectives. From mindfulness, there is the goal that the person should develop greater psychological flexibility by de-identifying with their own mental events as absolute experiential realities, thus empowering an equanimous posture in the face of what is observed [18]. Following this line, the essence of Buddhist psychology lies in the teaching that there is no such thing as an immutable and permanent self but that the perception of the self is a product of an ongoing mental process [44]. Understanding this allows us to transcend the 'psychological materialism' that is dominant in the west and which pushes us to attempt to improve ourselves by enhancing our self-esteem, self-confidence and self-control [25], in exchange for a new form of being with ourselves and others, releasing control and gaining awareness of what we feel from one moment to another, which requires that we become able to tolerate emptiness. On the other hand, Heidegger's view of Aesthetics tells us that through the process of observing beauty from a nonintellectual

perspective—known as *alétheia*—it is possible to gain access to the very essence of things. This shares a central idea with mindfulness that its practice favours the capacity for seeing things as they are, to perceive their essence without the ornaments of fantasy, desire or rejection; it allows access to the very centre of reality.

From the subjective point of view, the psychological experience of avoiding those mental contents that we do not wish to have, and for which we actively develop strategies to help us avoid contact with, is what has become known in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as experiential avoidance disorder [45], a pattern that becomes pathological in the measure that it distances people from the things that they consider to be valuable in their lives. Nonetheless, the presence of mental events that are considered either positive or negative, desirable or not desirable or, in broader terms, beautiful or not beautiful is to a great extent what we consider in order to define or evaluate ourselves. Thus, the invitation is to avoid becoming trapped in an idea of the self as an immutable entity, to let go of the habit of constantly evaluating whether or not our wishes or yearnings are being fulfilled and to understand that no experience or idea of oneself provides an absolute definition of who I am or how the world is.

Amongst the various contributions that the Buddhist tradition has given to the perception of beauty, the vision of the impermanence of things and the transitory nature of that which we perceive from moment to moment are worth highlighting. We have already discussed how Buddhist practice teaches us to accept change, to adapt and to learn to feel comfortable with transience, along with ceasing to hold on to an illusory solidity of things. This truth of the transience of things brings us to the perception that beauty is not sustainable nor entirely perdurable in time, and, therefore, if we insist in holding onto that which pleases us or causes pleasure, we end up frustrated by the disappearance of the pleasing experience. Accepting this condition, according to Olendzki [44], 'is achieved by cultivating equanimity, which is a way of being present without attachment when there is pleasure, and without resistance when there is pain'.

In this sense, both models argue—albeit with different terminologies—for a specific manner or attitude with which to approach what is perceived. From Kant, perception must be selfless, and, in mindfulness terms, the observation of mental events brings with it a beginner's mental attitude as a curious and non-judgemental observer of what is observed. In other words, it is to be equanimous in the face of what is perceived.

The process of the practice of mindfulness brings us to a broader vision of the self and thus to encounter a beauty that is not defined by cultural patterns or canons that dictate how it should be or that reject anything that does not fit within the pattern. It is an intimate encounter with a particular beauty that is not copied or imposed from outside, but that surges from a personal experience, and is thus unique, advancing from a critical position towards one that is kinder with oneself.

This is why we say that mindfulness permits an encounter with a beauty of the self that becomes revealed in different ways with practice. And what is revealed? A self that is able to change the relationship with its emotions, thoughts or sensations. This fact gives a greater

degree of control back to the person—not control over other things, as such—but the control to respond to things that happen. In other words, one is able to achieve personal empowerment and stability in life. It is interesting to note that this quality has been observed in people both with and without mental illness, which emphasises that mindfulness is a skill that can be trained in all individuals [46].

This beauty is not limited to a new relationship with thoughts, emotions and feelings. To the contrary, the body is constituted as the source of knowledge of the mental and physical state but also as a mechanism to modify that state, for example, through breathing. This is of great relevance to the well-being of people where, on the one hand, there is a greater acceptance of the body, and, on the other hand, the body is not seen as something foreign to oneself. As was pointed out by a participant in one of our groups:

‘I had never felt my body, how my lungs and heart work. I experienced my breathing’.

The practice of mindfulness does not only have an impact at the individual level; it also allows one to appreciate the other from a place that is free from judgement and evaluation. Specifically, it has been demonstrated how children, after training in mindfulness, demonstrate more pro-social and empathic behaviours. This aspect is central in programmes that actively involve compassion towards oneself and others as central elements in practice. One of the key elements is recognising the shared humanity or the interconnected nature of our lives [47]. A number of studies have shown how the practice of mindfulness increases the development of positive emotions and behaviours related to compassion, gratitude and generosity, in children, adolescents, adults and senior citizens alike [42, 48–50]. The following account of an adolescent who participated in a mindfulness workshop in school serves as an example of the above:

‘I am very good at getting upset and fighting, but now, when I’m getting into a fight, I can calm myself down; I breathe, close my eyes, and that has helped me to get along better with others’.

The perception of beauty through mindfulness also influences the way in which we perceive the environment. Recent studies have argued for the effect that the practice of mindfulness could have on care for the environment [51]. Specifically, it has been suggested that improved psychological well-being, centred here and now, promotes the satisfaction of non-material needs, which impacts directly and indirectly on the adoption of sustainable behaviours. In fact, being more aware of how my behaviour impacts on others and on the environment could help self-regulation. Nonetheless, there is another element that has received less attention in the relationship between mindfulness and sustainable behaviours [52, 53], which is that the contemplation of nature itself can reveal both things: a new point of view on what is perceived and potentially an insight into the self through what is observed. This aspect recalls the practice of *nembutsu*, as discussed previously.

For instance, it is not infrequent that participants, after mindfulness training, report how a tree that was always present near their place of residence, had never really been seen by them before and how they were surprised by its beauty. Thus, the contemplation of beauty could be a means of getting to know oneself, as much as it could appreciate its beauty.

In short, we argue that the practice of mindfulness develops the capacity for inner contemplation and also for contemplating the world, by focussing one's attention on what is being experienced in the moment and being aware of it with equanimity, curiosity and openness whilst momentarily suspending conceptual evaluation of what is observed in favour of direct perception. This allows us to perceive the intrinsic beauty in ourselves, in others and in the environment that surrounds us.

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