

The Commons

---

# THE MINDFULNESS REVOLUTION



Donna Oropall



# THE MINDFULNESS REVOLUTION

Series Design: Amanda Barnes, SASD Design Service  
Image: Joe Giampaoli

# The Commons



## THE MINDFULNESS REVOLUTION

---

Donna Oropall

The School of Arts and Sciences, University of Bridgeport

**F**or the first time in my life, I was trending. The reason I was trending was that I was paying attention to my life as it unfolded, understood that, and was able to teach others how to trend as well. What do I mean? The practice that I had discovered and integrated into my classes had gone worldwide and mainstream. Journalist Anderson Cooper was interviewing the founder of mindful meditation techniques, Jon Kabat-Zinn, on 60 Minutes, CBS's Sunday primetime news show.

Anderson Cooper put away his cellphone and was hooked up to an EEG that measured his brainwaves while he meditated, providing tangible evidence for the entire world to see. 60 Minutes also showed MRI scans demonstrating that mindfulness practitioners increased gray matter concentration within the left hippocampus, the posterior cingulate cortex, the temporo-parietal junction, and the cerebellum. These are the brain regions involved in learning and memory, emotional regulation, sense of self, and perspective taking. So people who gave up their cellphones and practiced mindfulness could change their brains.

This should have been no surprise. Over the past few decades, the worlds of psychology/human services, interpersonal neurobiology, Buddhist psychology, and meditation have been incorporated into mainstream medicine. Oh my, what a wonder! Body, mind, and medicine as one. All the stars were aligning. I had been practicing mindful meditation for years, and had recently incorporated it into my classes at the University of Bridgeport.

My own journey began, if you can truly say that, on a crisp fall Thursday afternoon. I drove north on Route 684 to the foliage-laden Berkshire Mountains in Lenox, Massachusetts, to spend the weekend training with cognitive behavioral mindfulness therapist Susan Woods and psychologist Miv London, founder of the Mindfulness Center at the University of Vermont. It was my first encounter with experiential learning since graduate school. I spent the weekend practicing mindfulness techniques: yoga, meditation, mindful walking, mindful eating, and silence when not in class. This would be the first of many encounters with like-minded practitioners, brilliant scientists, and contemplatives who were joining together to raise the collective consciousness of humanity by gaining insight into the human condition.

*“Mindfulness is awareness cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”—Jon Kabat-Zinn*

So what is mindfulness and why has this simple concept become such a revolutionary skill? Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of what most consider to be the first modern book of mindfulness, *Full Catastrophe Living*, states that, “Mindfulness is paying attention on purpose in the moment as if your life depended on it.” In the 1970s Kabat-Zinn was instrumental in starting the scientific revolution that recognized that we were able to change our brains, hence the term “neuroplasticity.” The brain we have can be made into a brain that can respond with more patience and soften with compassion in a difficult situation instead of reacting with aversion. Mindfulness meditation trains the mind, facilitates emotional regulation, increases self-awareness, and

strengthens executive function. Since Kabat-Zinn began his stress reduction program, mindfulness/meditation has been successful in helping people with chronic pain, anxiety, trauma and other stress-related illnesses.

*“My friends, it is through the establishment of the lovely clarity of mindfulness that you can let go of the grasping after past and future, overcome attachment and grief, abandon clinging and anxiety, and awaken an unshakable freedom of heart, here and now.” – Buddha*

Recent research on mindfulness suggests that when monks, who are seasoned meditators, are hooked up to fMRI and other diagnostic equipment, they have increased gamma activity on the left side of their brains. The increased gamma activity causes them to have more clarity and experience intensity in feelings of compassion, while at the same time feelings of fear, anxiety, and hatred are inhibited. The Dalai Lama and his followers have been delighted to collaborate with Western scientists to spend days in laboratories hooked up to modern equipment to prove to the research-based and skeptical Western world that their emerging research in mindfulness is based on scientific data. Currently, meditation is being incorporated into mainstream medicine to relieve anxiety that is the basis of neuromuscular diseases and chronic pain.

Starting in 2002, the Mind and Life Conference has combined the Eastern contemplative and the Western scientist to discuss like-minded ideas. The Dalai Lama has been collaborating to prove that Buddhism is a modern religion that is open to science, since the Buddhists have a 2,500-year history of investigating the mind. He has encouraged the monks' presence in the laboratory, and provided scientific evidence that with meditation destructive emotions such as anger, fear, and hatred can be transformed into positive emotions such as compassion, happiness, and contentment, rendering individuals less prone to reactivity and more prone to peaceful abiding and ultimately physical health. What neuro-imaging has shown is that with meditation



seems to increase the density of gray matter in the left brain, the home of the hippocampus, known for its vulnerability to stress, and the amygdala, which helps process emotions. Hence the increase in positive emotions and the decrease in stress response. Until the age of neuro-imaging, there has been no way to prove that the brain has the capacity to change, a capacity that is called neuroplasticity. However, recent imaging studies now support the idea that neuroplasticity is indeed possible.

*“I wish that life should not be cheap, but sacred. I wish the days to be as centuries, loaded, fragrant.” - Ralph Waldo Emerson*

After being certified by David Nichtern, the Buddhist meditation teacher and musician, I practiced meditation twice daily. As a result of my personal experience with mindfulness, I was finally able to step out of “automatic pilot” and step into life. It was a feeling of being fully immersed in the present moment and alive, happy, openhearted and clearheaded. I slowly became more present, nonjudgmental, patient, accepting, trusting, and empathic. Mindfulness helped me to be in the present moment and cultivate beginners’ mind, looking at the world as if it was always fresh and new. There is nothing stale about the world that is looked at with the eyes of a child. The goal became not to strive to be anything that you are not, but instead to be patient with who you are right now and accept others for who they are. Equanimity comes from trusting that you are exactly where you are supposed to be, and from letting go of the striving to just be.

For someone brought up in America, one of the strangest things about mindfulness meditation is the aspect of non-judgment. However, as Dr. Daniel Siegel writes, “the practice of intentional, nonjudgmental awareness of moment-to-moment experience has been practiced since ancient times in both the East and the West.” When incorporated into Jon Kabat-Zinn’s definition of mindfulness, the idea is to look at the world and the situation as an observer who is present in the moment but not reactive to the situation until it is experienced. Therefore we would notice the situation, make space around it, acknowledge it, and let the

emotion or reaction happen naturally. This premise has helped people in and out of the psychotherapeutic world to realize that we are not our thoughts, but observers of our thoughts, positive, negative, or neutral. More beneficially, if we are not reactive, we can step back, observe, not judge, and proceed to move forward with a response of nonjudgmental thought. This might lead us to think that non-judging is a passive response; however, the term “nonjudgmental” has nothing to do with addressing right or wrong.

As the flowers bloomed, seasons changed, and years passed, I was privileged to study with many masters and encounter some of the most loving, kind and compassionate, passionate and brilliant scientists and contemplatives. The contentment and clarity of mind of my newfound mentors encouraged me to start my own mindfulness practice. For years I had been struggling with an informal practice, which consisted of focusing my attention on my breath as I did many forms of exercise. The time had finally come when I had the attitude and commitment to start a formal sitting meditation practice, twenty minutes twice a day. There was a perfect corner in my bedroom that was turned into an altar, which I adorned with meaningful statues, flowers, pictures and an accompanying cushion that invited me to sit down and go inside. Eventually, I added yoga to my informal practice, and this seemed to be a perfect regimen for my body and soul.

*“What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared to what lives within us.” – Henry David Thoreau*

I was not alone in my journey. The world of mindfulness-based techniques is bursting open and offering alternative treatments to anxiety-based disorders. With one internet search for mindfulness and therapy, you can find mindfulness articles and programs for children and youth, as well as intervention for obesity, substance abuse disorder, stress reduction, and gambling addiction. You can find articles on teaching mindfulness to nursing students and prisoners. We have medical doctors writing books such as *A Still Quiet Place*, introducing meditation to the

traditional medical field by incorporating an eight-week stress reduction course for children and adolescents.

Educational institutions have also embraced mindfulness. We have “positive psychologists” such as Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Tal Ben Shahar all teaching courses on happiness at Ivy League institutions. The Dalai Lama partnered with Emory University and the University of Wisconsin, Madison, spending time with Richie Davidson, a pioneer in the study of the neuroscience behind the benefits of mindfulness and meditation. There are reports that scans of monks’ brains show that mindful meditation alters brain structure and functioning. The list goes on and on.... Yes, there has been a positive trend.

Trendsetting companies such as Facebook, Instagram, and Google are recognizing the power and importance of mindfulness practice and its impact on the satisfaction and productivity of their employees. Google has embraced mindfulness by hiring and paying someone to be its “enlightenment engineer.” Called the “Jolly Good Fellow,” Chade Meng Tan was televised discussing a job description that included enlightening minds, opening hearts, and creating world peace. Many new creative business ventures have followed, embracing mindfulness and meditation as part of the workday.

*“Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy.  
Who is your friend? Mind is your friend.  
Learn the ways of the mind. Tend the mind with care.” – Buddha*

Mass media has finally jumped on board, too. There isn’t a week when you open up the *New York Times* Style section or Week in Review and you don’t see an article on meditation/ mindfulness, meditation groups for business networks, meditation studios for quick fixes, and meditation groups in lieu of happy hours. We have sports figures such as Kobe Bryant and Phil Jackson expounding on the value of meditation. The trendiest gifts in town are the new book by Russell Simmons and Chris Morrow,

entitled *Success Through Stillness: Meditation Made Simple*, and Arianna Huffington's book, based on her newfound passion for meditation, called *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-being, Wisdom, and Wonder*. Mindfulness has become mainstream.

Again, this should be no surprise. The Mindfulness Revolution started in the ancient Vedic and Buddhist teaching, and has been around in Western culture, too, though very few noticed until recently. It is obvious in the great works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau. We have only now given this name to it, and begun integrating the philosophy with science. So the goal of the new Mindfulness Revolution is to awaken students, patients, children, employees, friends, prisoners, and soldiers to a new way of being that has been around for centuries – but it has to be relearned. This was not only a personal journey; my goal as a teacher was to benefit my students' minds with these practices.

The first thing that changed was my teaching style. One thing mindfulness meditation taught me was to find the balance between the heart and head. It was my realization of finding this imbalance – as a person who used my heart much more than I used my head – that led me on this journey. In other words, I had not mastered a way to use my gift to benefit others. As I became mindful of my style, I have been able to modify my behaviors to increase my headiness and decrease my heartiness and become a more impactful, effective instructor. I began to read more journals in the field to boost my knowledge and to give my teaching the deep resonance of fact. Whether we want to call it contemplative philosophy or new science, the outcome would be the same.

After my studies I was able to enter my classroom and explain to my students the benefits to be derived from this unique training. My motivation was to increase my executive function, strength, stability of mind, productivity, openheartedness, and happiness to share all of this enlightenment with them. It was clear to my students that I was passionate about teaching them something

important that I learned that worked for me.

I was able to share my enthusiasm with many of my students who were armed with the attitude and commitment to make positive lasting changes in their worlds and as Human Services students in the world at large.

I haven't taught a class without first reading an excerpt from *Peace Is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hahn, *Mindfulness for Everyone* by Jan Chozen, or *Mindfulness for Beginners* by Jon Kabat-Zinn. When we start our lessons we are grounded in the present moment, awake and available to each other to then learn and share information. In addition, we have worked as a group to discuss mindful solutions to sleeplessness, anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, addiction, depression, and more.

Mindfulness incorporated in their coursework has helped my students to best learn their lessons or just learn a different way of being in the world. Their sleep patterns and reactivity have changed by incorporating meditation into their worlds. They have become more able to move on into the world as helpers or just to soften and see the world with new eyes. In the classroom, the tone has changed; there is more patience and interactive discussion. I could clearly see the shift in my classroom as my students shifted in collective consciousness.

*“Happiness, not in another place but this place . . . not for another hour, but this hour.” – Walt Whitman*

At the outset of my Multicultural Perspectives course, in order to foster self-awareness, I ask my students to tell me who they are, by writing a self-reflective ten lines, all beginning with the words “I am,” along with descriptions of their ethnic, regional, and cultural backgrounds. As a result of the depth and breadth of student diversity at UB, one semester this class was actually a compilation of at least twenty-seven different cultures and subcultures. I gave them an evening to prepare this information and asked them to soul search and be truthful to encourage

their awareness before the onset of our journey in Multicultural Perspectives. To my amazement and great satisfaction, every student who shared his or her thoughtful work in class included “I am love, I am openhearted.”

So here was a sign that I was looking for to justify my research: the students in my Senior-level classes becoming present with themselves. One cherished student who spent much time in my classes implemented mindfulness into her Capstone Project, which was entitled “Meditation and Life.” In addition, I have numerous students who in the course of their internships (e.g., in schools, social service agencies, and nonprofit agencies) are incorporating mindfulness practices with their toddlers, children, adolescents, and young adults. For example, I have students who encourage their adolescents to eat “One Bite at a Time” in a conscious and mindful manner, and teachers who begin their morning with toddlers engaged in a “Three-Minute Breathing Space.” I even have a student who is going on to Lesley University in Massachusetts to pursue a Master’s Degree in Mindfulness. I often run into students on campus who will thank me and say things like “I couldn’t have made it through my hectic summer without my mindfulness practice” or “I think of you all the time when I take my seat to meditate.”

*“Renew thyself completely each day; do it again and again, and forever again.” – Chinese inscription cited by Henry David Thoreau in Walden.*

By incorporating mindfulness into all of my classes, I hope I am creating a student body that will move forward into the world selflessly working to improve the lives of others, and thus insure their own happiness and satisfaction by living with a purpose. I try to teach them how to care for themselves in the process by using their mindfulness/meditation skills. They will be able to keep their minds stable, clear, and strong as they move into the world of helping as social workers, teachers, addiction counselors, and members of other helping professions.

The ultimate goal of mindfulness practice is to soften into the world. It is important to understand that the external world cannot be controlled. That is the reason we work on creating our internal world and looking at ourselves with gentle awareness, without judgment. I encourage my students to think back on a time when they went into a situation with a hard approach and the outcome was a good one, and they are not able to find many. Mindfulness can help us to be aware of the negative patterns that keep us from being happy, healthy, and productive. It also provides a great opportunity to get to know our own thoughts, facilitate and develop deep inner resources for learning, growing, and healing, and potentially transform our understanding of who we are and how to live our healthiest life with most meaning.

So here is the trend: step out of automatic pilot and stay in the moment. Be Awake, Be Aware, Be Conscious. Live Mindfully.

## The Commons: UB Faculty Essays

The School of Arts and Sciences publishes faculty essays on topics that address a general audience in order to encourage the dissemination of ideas, to increase the dialogue between the disciplines, and to support the core curriculum. There is a four-member editorial board that will vote on acceptance and suggest editorial advice where necessary and/or helpful.

Once accepted, these essays will be published in two ways. A small run of 100 saddle-stitched copies designed by SASD Design Service will be printed. These can be used at the discretion of the professor, but should primarily be given to majors and other professors. The essays will also be published in PDF form and made available online.

These essays can and should be used for UB classes. Once enough essays are collected, a bound anthology may be assembled and printed. Again, this could be used for future UB core classes like Capstone or First Year Seminar, or an Honors course designed specifically around the material. These essays are published by the School of Arts and Sciences but submission will be open to all UB faculty.



## Guidelines

1. The essay should be between 2000-5000 words, though exceptions can be made for slightly longer ones.
2. Essays should not have had prior appearance in print or in digital form. The author will retain the copyright for future publication.
3. Essays should engage a general readership. They should be influenced by scholarly training and experiences related to our disciplines, but not be scholarly writing. For example, an essay on “Henry Miller and Jean Francois Lyotard: The Aesthetics of ‘The Inhuman’ in *Tropic of Cancer*” would be inappropriate both because it is too narrow a topic, and because it would be too technical for a general audience. However, this is also not a blog entry. Instead, locate it somewhere between a personal essay and a semi-formal essay on a general topic of interest.
4. The citation method will be end notes (a style sheet is available), although it is certainly possible to write an essay without notes at all or with a list of sources for further reading.
5. Faculty should also provide a biographical paragraph and a photo.
6. A proposal or query letter is encouraged, with or without a draft of the essay. Certainly, if there is a completed essay you think is appropriate, send it to the editorial board. But before starting an essay, we encourage you to consult the board in the planning stages.
7. Send all materials to [thecommons@bridgeport.edu](mailto:thecommons@bridgeport.edu).





Mindfulness meditation is in the news and in our culture, a seemingly new “trend” that celebrities and universities alike have embraced. However, as Professor Donna Oropall points out, this “trend” has been part of Eastern and Western cultures for millennia, and it is only now that science is beginning to catch up. She investigates this phenomenon through her own experiences practicing and teaching, encouraging us to rethink our preconceptions about the way we live.

Donna Oropall is a lecturer in Human Services at the University of Bridgeport where she teaches courses in the Human Services Program like Mindfulness Meditation, the Process of Living and Dying, Multicultural Perspectives, Introduction to Counseling, Human Services and Yoga/ Meditation. In addition to running Cognitive Behavioral Mindfulness groups in lower Fairfield County, she spends her free time volunteering at Greenwich Hospital Oncology and Surgery Units doing Healing Touch, an Energy Healing modality on receptive patients. You may also find her name on the schedule at Kaia Yoga Greenwich where she substitute teaches on nights and weekends. She is currently researching a forthcoming book on the effects of mindfulness on college students.