

# Mindfulness, Nothing Special, Yet Special!

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**Jyoti Nanda**

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## **Abstract**

This is a response to Maureen Cavill's paper written following the publication of mine entitled 'Mindfulness – A Lived Experience of Existential-Phenomenological Themes' (Nanda, 2009), in Existential Analysis 20.1: January 2009.

## **Key words**

Mindfulness, assumptions, 'tool', 'technique', formal practice, remembering to re-orient, present, noticing, existential-phenomenological, phenomenology, Cavill, Thich Nhat Hanh, Suzuki, 'big mind'

## **Preamble**

I am delighted that my paper 'Mindfulness – A Lived Experience of Existential-Phenomenological Themes' has generated a response from Maureen Cavill. It opens up avenues for discussion. Notwithstanding the appealing rhyming quality of the name 'Jyoti Nandi' given to me by Cavill in her paper, in the interest of accuracy, and not causing confusion to the reader, may I point out that the name is Jyoti Nanda!

I would like to thank the editors of Existential Analysis for giving me the opportunity to respond to Cavill's as yet unpublished paper, so that both her short paper and mine can be published together in the same issue of the Journal.

Cavill and I have substantial areas of agreement. We are agreed that mindfulness is a simple practice, and that it is embodied in the breath, and in everyday living. We also agree that life can be found only in the present moment, that intention has an important function in the return to the present moment and that mindfulness gives us a sense of openness and possibility.

However, we do also have areas where we differ or where Cavill has interpreted my paper in ways I do not agree with. Let me outline these in brief and then deal with each of these points in the rest of this paper. In the main, this discussion centres around five areas: Cavill's assertion that in my view mindfulness is a tool in a therapeutic toolkit; her question on the place and value of formal practice in cultivating a capability for mindfulness in everyday life; her interpretation of Jon Kabat-Zinn's approach on mindfulness as striving for perfection; her own view of

mindfulness as striving for a particular frame of mind and finally, our different understanding of the notion of ‘Interbeing’.

## **Mindfulness - a mere ‘tool’ and ‘technique’?**

Cavill assumes that I consider Mindfulness as a tool in a ‘therapeutic tool kit’ – as if it were unrelated more broadly to an approach to everyday life and living itself. Nothing could be further from my position than this understanding of my paper. Mindfulness is a fundamental way of being in relationship to our life. To see it as technology useful for fixing things would be to misunderstand and diminish what mindfulness is all about.

In my original paper (Nanda, 2009), I highlight the possibility of cultivating a certain approach to life and living through the practice of mindfulness – being present to what shows itself to us, accepting and allowing of what is present, opening to the fullness of our existence – not only positive and pleasant experiences but the full range of experience, letting go of our own expectations on how something should be, and coming back to looking at things with a beginner’s mind, with fresh eyes, with curiosity, while recognising our assumptions, and how they come in the way of our seeing and experiencing.

My paper (ibid.) points the reader towards seeing that our existence has pain and suffering, that change, and impermanence are a given of our existence. Existential-phenomenological themes arise for us with the practice of mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness gives us the perspective to have a whole different relationship to the life that we live with all the relational interconnections of self/other/world.

My paper (ibid.) also looks at ways in which mindfulness practice and existential-phenomenological thinking are different. In my opinion, not acknowledging the differences is being disrespectful to both traditions. That the practice of mindfulness can complement existential phenomenological practice for me brings forth a natural query regarding the two practices coming together.

## **The place and value of formal practice**

Cavill suggests in her paper that according to teachers in the Zen tradition of Mindfulness (as opposed to ‘Vipashyana’ or ‘Vipassana’ tradition), the formal practice (what she refers to as ‘tool’ or ‘technique’ of Mindfulness) is not really deemed necessary.

Cavill says about Mindfulness – ‘It’s nothing special. By that I mean mindfulness is not something to be acquired, it is innate in us and fundamental to human experiencing. Unfortunately, this is also something we can lose in the busyness of our everyday lives.’

I agree we do have the fundamental ability to be present. However, the purpose of mindfulness as practice is remembering to re-orient our

attention and awareness to our current experience with radical acceptance, and being receptive to what arises again and again. It is a conscious practice which helps us to deepen our understanding of ourselves and helps us work with suffering in our lives. In the Buddhist practice, it leads to what we know as wisdom and understanding, and, ultimately, compassion toward ourselves and others.

While, like Cavill, I would say we all have the innate capacity to be present, I would also add that it is the conscious practice of remembering to be present moment by moment, *with acceptance*, which makes mindfulness a significant practice.

Since Cavill draws from Zen Masters Shrunyu Suzuki (also called Suzuki Roshi), and Thich Nhat Hanh to support her argument, let me draw attention to the writings of both these teachers on the same issue, and also offer my understanding of their writings.

Suzuki (2002) speaks of practices or ‘tools’ if you like, like ‘zazen’, or ‘sitting meditation’ and ‘kinhin’ or ‘walking meditation’. He gives guidance on ‘shikantaza’ or ‘just sitting’ which is also described as ‘not suppressing and not indulging thinking’, or as ‘exhaling completely’. Let’s see what Suzuki says in ‘Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind’ about mindfulness as nothing special. It might be innate in us, but does he consider mindfulness practice or ‘tool’ as unnecessary?

**‘Nothing Special** *“If you continue this simple practice every day, you will obtain some wonderful power. Before you attain it, it is something wonderful, but after you attain it, it is nothing special.”* (Suzuki, 2009,46). Indeed ‘it is nothing special’ because of practising zazen (a formal ‘technique’ of sitting meditation) everyday. ‘... nothing special’ does not mean that there is no need for zazen.

In the classic Buddhist meaning of the term ‘nothing special’, it means that all things arise and pass away. It is recognizing impermanence, no separate self, or the lack of any solidity, substance, or immutability in phenomena. Suffering results when we cling to things we desire or like (which are impermanent) or reject things we dislike, and want to avoid. The point is that nothing is above the law of impermanence, so, in that sense, nothing is special.

The importance of practising mindfulness is spoken of by both Thich Nhat Hanh (1976, 2006), and Suzuki (2002, 2009). It is important to see what they teach in a fuller contextual manner. To cherry pick isolated ideas and ascribe them to meditation Masters to give weight to an argument can be misleading.

Thich Nhat Hanh (2006) points to twenty Mindfulness exercises or ‘tools’ if you like. These are guided meditations in ‘Transformation and Healing – Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness’. He points to ways of mindfully observing as a participant observer, not just as an observer - mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of the mind, and of the

objects of the mind. Just because Thich Nhat Hanh offers guidance, does this as a consequence diminish the guidance to a mere ‘tool’ or ‘technique’? My view is that these practices present us with the foundation of all the mindfulness practices. They guide us towards the transformation and healing of our difficult emotions and feelings, and move us towards peace with ourselves and with others.

In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Suzuki speaks of the importance of practice, especially in the beginning for practitioners ‘... it is completely mistaken to think that whatever you do is Zen or that it does not matter whether you practice or not.’ (Suzuki, 2009, 43). And again, ‘Of course, whatever we do is the expression of our true nature, but without this practice it is difficult to realize.’ (Suzuki, 2009, 47). He speaks of ‘...how wonderful it is to practice zazen. Our purpose is to keep this practice forever.’ (ibid. ,47).

Suzuki practices zazen or ‘technique’ if you like, even though he does not see it as anything special. Nor does he separate mindfulness in everyday life and the formal practice of zazen. He just sits. On the other hand, he also speaks of not getting attached to a particular point of view, even if it is the view point that zazen is necessary, or important. It is moving away from fixed ideas about good or bad, the practice is just opening to the present (Suzuki, 2002). ‘...It may be so, but it is not always so’ (Suzuki, 2002, 93).

Cavill differentiates between the formal practice of meditation (‘tool, or ‘technique’), and mindfulness in everyday life, while favouring the latter. For me, however, the formal practice of mindfulness and mindfulness in everyday life are completely part of each other. This view is also corroborated by Suzuki, ‘Zazen practice and everyday activity are one thing. We call zazen everyday life, and everyday life zazen.’ (Suzuki, 2009, 118-119).

## **Mindfulness, striving for perfection?**

Cavill is critical of Jon Kabat-Zinn , ‘...we have the idea that Mindfulness is something like a technique that has to be acquired, learned, and perfected’. Here Cavill misses the whole point of what the practice is about. My paper clearly highlights the attitude that is being cultivated in mindfulness as taught by Jon Kabat-Zinn. I quote from my paper,

*In intentionally connecting with and being with our unfolding experience as we are experiencing it, the attitude that is being cultivated is one of being open to, accepting, and being present to whatever experience arises for us in the moment, without having to fix it or trying to get rid of it; and being curious and attentive to it in a spirit of enquiry and investigation moment-by-moment*

(Kabat-Zinn, 2005).’ (Nanda, 2009, 155).

And it is certainly not about perfection as Cavill claims in her understanding of Kabat-Zinn. I quote from my paper again, ‘...mindfulness is not about achieving perfection, its focus is on practicing being with our unfolding experience and owning it as ours (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).’ (Nanda, 2009, 156).

Indeed, the mindfulness practices introduced by Kabat-Zinn in mind/body medicine for his patients are similar to practices that are found in both Buddhist traditions of Vipassana and Zen. Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings (1976, 2006) include guidance on Mindfulness practices – sitting meditation, walking meditation, eating meditation, body scan, and mindfulness in everyday life. These practices are also included by Kabat-Zinn in his programme for his patients.

Whether it is the Buddhist tradition of Zen or Vipassana, (and they have some differences in their expression of language and method), however, both practices fundamentally point us in the same direction – an open spacious awareness of how things are in the present. Opening to this possibility of their fundamental similarity requires, not so much reliance on language and reasoning, as it requires having a willingness to recognize and open up to a more intuitive non-verbal experience of what each tradition points towards.

The differences that Cavill implies between the mindfulness practices that Thich Nhat Hanh and Kabat-Zinn teach are certainly not substantial in any form or manner. Even the foreword of Jon Kabat-Zinn’s (2005) classic ‘Full Catastrophe Living’, is written by Thich Nhat Hanh. What is different is that Kabat-Zinn teaches mindfulness as a secular, non-religious practice grounded in evidence based research in mind/body medicine. He does not teach it as Buddhism. However, Kabat-Zinn does clearly emphasize that teaching mindfulness requires the teacher to embody a mindful stance. This requires an ongoing mindfulness practice for the teacher.

## **Mindfulness, a particular state of mind?**

I do not agree with the latter part of Cavill’s interpretation (see below, italics mine) that, ‘Thich Nhat Hanh says that mindfulness is coming back to our current activity *and not allowing our mind to wander (does she mean - wander?) off and away from what we are doing.*’

Perhaps, Cavill does not recognize the impossibility of ‘not allowing our mind to w(a)nder off’. It’s like the proverbial saying, ‘don’t think of monkey’. There is no way we can force our mind to do anything. All we can do is notice what the mind is doing. Indeed, the very moment of recognition of mind wandering is becoming mindful to the present moment, rather than ‘not allowing the mind to w(a)nder off’, which is a place of conflict with the mind, and contrary to the allowing stance of mindfulness. Peace happens, not by trying to make ourselves peaceful, but

when we stop being in conflict with how things are. Noticing where the mind is, and bringing it back to the present moment, or current activity gently is in itself the practice of mindfulness.

Cavill's interpretation of mindfulness 'to steadfastly wash the dishes with concentration, and not allow the mind to w(a)nder off into negative fantasies' suggests a use of concentration to not really open to the fullness of experience. The fundamental purpose of mindfulness is to open to all phenomena and, in doing so, allowing us the possibility of freeing our self from the control these phenomena may have on us. When anger arises, Thich Nhat Hanh says, 'Recognise and embrace your anger when it manifests itself. Care for it with tenderness rather than suppressing it.' (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2004, 7).

Similarly, Suzuki speaks of full acceptance, 'When you practice zazen you will accept the you who is thinking about something, without trying to be free of the images you have.' (Suzuki, 2002, 106).

The purpose of mindfulness practice is not to achieve a certain frame of mind and avoid others. To use it in that fashion would be to belittle its potential and misunderstand its broader purpose.

Suzuki speaks of how the practice of zazen itself helps us to embrace the different conditions in life, 'In the zazen posture, your mind and body have great power to accept things as they are, whether agreeable or disagreeable.' (Suzuki, 2009, 38).

From a meditative perspective, to me, the fundamental purpose of mindfulness is the process of existential transformation. It is not only 'concentration' or focusing the mind. Transformation happens not by trying to make it happen. It lies in moving away from expectations of how something should be and in allowing the full range of our experience to be present, while holding it in non-discursive, non-verbal open spaciousness, allowing all of it to rest in awareness, or what Suzuki (2009) calls 'big mind' as we practice neither grasping at the agreeable pleasant experience, nor repudiating disagreeable unpleasant experience. As Suzuki says,

'The true purpose (of Zen) is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes.' (Ibid., 33). Suzuki speaks of the attitude to adopt in zazen, 'If you leave your mind as it is, it will become calm. This mind is called big mind.' (Suzuki, 2009, 35).

I see a natural common purpose in both mindfulness practice and phenomenology. My interest lies in the phenomenological stance of openness to enquiry in relation to therapy and research. I have no issue with any particular theorist, nor am I attached to any one particular viewpoint, as long as the basic fundamental quality of listening with openness is not compromised.

For me it is important to recognize, with humility, that we as therapists are not objective viewers/listeners of clients in the therapy room. We come in with our past, our assumptions, our power in the relationship, and much

else. Recognizing our assumptions is an important step in seeing how we can, as best as possible, allow a clearing in which we can listen to the client respectfully, engage and relate with client, while staying alongside the client's lived experience.

Husserl's phenomenological method of enquiry as detailed by Spinelli (2005), is a reminder for me to acknowledge, not only 'what' we are experiencing in the therapeutic relationship, but also 'how' we experience what we experience. It moves us from notions of an objective truth, to that of meaning in a co-created space.

That mindfulness practice cultivates a stance of openness to enquiry could potentially, in my opinion, be of interest to any phenomenologist who values such a stance.

## **On Interbeing**

Cavill's statement on 'interbeing' (a word coined by Thich Nhat Hanh expressing 'emptiness' or no separate self): 'if we are peaceful, then we can bring peace to the world', while not untrue, misses the depth of what Thich Nhat Hanh says about interbeing and interconnectedness, which I was trying to express in my paper. I quote from my paper (Nanda, 2009).

*... 'Inter-being' is also expressed as 'emptiness' which means empty of a separate self. Emptiness does not mean non-existent, but it is a fullness of everything (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1988). He asks, if a sheet of paper is not empty, how can the sun, the log, and the tree be a part of it? (ibid.). While inter-being extends to the interconnectedness of all aspects of the universe (seeing a cloud in a cup of tea, for without the cloud there can be no rain or water or tea), it is also seeing our connectedness with all dimensions of our being (our ancestors, our parents/carers, our community, the society we live in, our culture, our planet, our universe, indeed all aspects of our existence, be it physical, personal, social, cultural or universal). We are inter-connected with all of it. Thich Nhat Hanh (ibid.) notes that every phenomenon is both individual and collective in nature. Both are inter-dependent on each other as they develop and transform. 'Collective and individual give rise to each other' (ibid.:84). Collective is made of individual, and individual is made of collective. Collective and individual inter-are. They are neither one nor two. Self, world, and other inter-are. They are both individual and collective (ibid. :2006).*

(Nanda, 2009)

Thich Nhat Hanh is asking us to look deeply, so we see the interconnectedness of our self with all other aspects of this world. In relation to clients, I can see 'interbeing' as our human-to-human connection where

both therapist and client are affected by each other, and are subject to the same conditions of impermanence, change, and no separate self.

I experienced the simplicity and beauty of inter-connectedness when I stayed a few years ago at Plum village, Southern France at Thich Nhat Hanh's monastery with my husband. Before leaving, I thanked an elderly monk for the serenity, peace, joy, and happiness I felt in the atmosphere at the monastery. His reply was, 'Just as my practice nourishes you, your smile nourishes me. This is inter-being.' The generosity, spontaneity, graciousness, and reciprocity of the response while it touched me, also showed me that each one of us plays a part in this interconnected (co-created/multi-created) web of relationships in this world.

Cavill might see my exposition as complex, or theoretical. However, I see her expression of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls 'interbeing' as missing the whole structural depth of no separate self, or of an empty self that Thich Nhat Hanh is conveying – seeing a cloud in a cup of tea!

## **Concluding remarks**

Cavil may be making an excessive claim when she asserts she is offering an alternative perspective on mindfulness to the one that I have offered, or breaking new ground. Her understanding of my paper (Nanda, 2009) is based on many unexamined and inaccurate assumptions. I hope that my response has helped to clarify some of these assumptions.

Yes, mindfulness is nothing special; we all have the innate capability to be present. However, most of us also recognize how hard it is for us to be present, and those of us who practice mindfulness recognize how often we are not mindful.

What is special, however, is that mindfulness practice helps us to *remember* to re-orient our attention and awareness to the present moment repeatedly, *without blaming our self for being forgetful*. It is both a forgiving and demanding practice. Its practice allows the discursive mind to quiet down. When we really allow things to be present, with radical acceptance in a non-discursive, meditative manner, we open ourselves to a whole different way of seeing and understanding things, rather than a simple reinforcement of what we already know.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) speaks of the possibility of transformation of suffering with practicing mindfulness where it is possible to fill our minds with the arising of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Indeed, most orientations of therapy including the existential-phenomenological orientation will be cautious of making such claims.

Does mindfulness practice have a place in existential-phenomenological therapy? I have no hesitation in re-iterating my earlier query, 'What if the practices of mindfulness and existential-phenomenological therapy came together?' (Nanda, 2009, 160).

This does not mean that mindfulness practice needs to be imposed on anyone as a 'tool'. Rather, in keeping with the existential-phenomenological tradition of openness, it is having the option of the possibility of introducing a practice for therapists which has the potential of deepening our connection with our self and others, and in opening to what Suzuki calls 'big mind' for anyone who would like to freely engage with its possibilities.

I would like to thank Maureen Cavill for this opportunity to exchange our views in this enquiry into the understanding of what mindfulness might mean for us as therapists and in the totality of our lives. I sit with Suzuki Roshi's statement,

*When we do not expect anything we can be ourselves. That is our way, to live fully in each moment of time.*

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**Jyoti Nanda**

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