

Mindfulness for sustainability: a personal journey

The relationship between mindfulness and sustainable living has intrigued me for many years. I originally came to mindfulness through non-religious practices such as free diving and rock climbing, as well as spending years hiking barefoot in the most remote natural landscapes. You may be wondering: how do walking barefoot, free diving and rock climbing link with mindfulness? By their very nature, these practices tend to trigger the “attitude of mindfulness” through the complex (and absorbing) physical movements taking place in the wild. Thanks to this trivial fact, I wonder if my unconditional love for nature and my commitment to live as sustainably as possible were strengthened by my regular practice of mindfulness in nature.

Determined to understand “why” my active presence in pristine environments triggered a healthier mental and physical existence, I started researching this topic more systematically. While notions such as ‘sustainability from within’, ‘ecological mindfulness’, or ‘contemplative practices’ have been neglected in sustainability science and teaching, there is scientific support for the positive influence of mindfulness on: (1) subjective well-being; (2) the activation of (intrinsic/ non-materialistic) core values; (3) consumption and sustainable behavior; (4) the human–nature connection; (5) equity issues; (6) social activism; and (7) deliberate, flexible, and adaptive responses to climate change.

Growing scientific evidence suggests two key fascinating ideas. First, mindfulness, by acting on these individual and social dimensions, could help us to shift from materialist to post-materialist values and from anthropocentric to ecological worldviews. Second, it helps us to craft a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable society. Echoing the most updated studies, I explore in this article some of the possible reasons why the practice of mindfulness and its experiential understanding could be one of the simplest yet profound catalysts towards transformative sustainability.

What is mindfulness?

While mindfulness is a significant element of Buddhist tradition, the recent popularity of mindfulness in the western context is generally considered to have been initiated by Jon Kabat-Zinn who defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” That is, when we are mindful, “thoughts and feelings are observed as events in the mind, without over-identifying with them and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual pattern of reactivity.” Hence, one does not attempt to change thoughts and feelings. What changes is how one reacts and relates to them.

It is worth emphasizing here that mindfulness is not escapism that results in passivity or disconnection from life. Rather, it is a tool to bring one into closer contact with life by helping to circumvent the self-generated thoughts about life that act to pull one away from it. It follows that the “good life” does not consist of fulfilling external role expectations, but of living one's life in full awareness of one's states of being. Obviously, mindfulness is better understood when experienced. However, this very simple definition already indicates how mindfulness helps to redefine the boundaries of the self for the best.

Values, empathy and compassion

A large chunk of research validates the claim that mindfulness improves well-being and health-related conditions, such as chronic pain, stress, anxiety, depression, immune function, and satisfaction with life. Mindfulness meditation has been pointed out as one of the more effective ways of achieving happiness. But why are mindfulness-based practices so beneficial in terms of happiness and well-being?

First, it can reduce unhappiness by increasing the individual's ability to be present. Research shows that having a wandering mind is correlated with less happiness, even when thinking about emotionally neutral topics. People who are able to be in the "here and now" are the happiest. Research has also shown that happier people live more sustainably. Moreover, intrinsic values are associated with higher well-being without much use of material resources, an example of so-called "sustainable happiness", "...the pursuit of happiness that does not exploit other people, the environment or future generations."

Second, the mindfulness technique(s) involves focusing on oneself but also on cultivating an attitude of care and compassion in relation to friends, family and strangers. In the end, this attitude can (should?) be extended to all beings. I believe that a state of mindfulness allows us to observe thoughts, entities, and emotions non-judgmentally and in a mode of contemplation and with a sense of intimate connection (rightfully so). This allows us to see the intrinsic and unique beauty in all things, as well as the value of diversity as a corollary.

Along this line of thought, research in environmental psychology tells us that people find the landscapes most enjoyable and relaxing when they have a certain amount of mystery such as bent paths, alcoves, hidden valleys. Diversity, complexity and fuzziness seem therefore to be positively experienced. Mindfulness would allow us to rediscover this evolutionary predisposition

Third, mindfulness might improve well-being by contributing to a greater sense of clarity with regard to one's values and acting consistently with them. Recent research suggests that our goals, the pursuit of them, and resulting actions are not always the result of conscious choices. People tend to experience the world through cognitive filters of a habitual and prior conditioned nature not always susceptible to adjustments aimed at rational and reflective thought. Thus, to the extent that mindfulness reduces automaticity and promotes pro-environmental values, compassion, and increased self-control, such mental training could also facilitate the translation of pro-environmental intentions into more sustainable behavior. Consequently, mindfulness may "serve as an antidote to consumerism". Research shows that higher mindfulness is associated with smaller financial desire discrepancies and greater subjective well-being, and that smaller desire discrepancies are related to greater well-being.

Finally, mindfulness meditation is an activity that appears to reduce the curse of the "hedonic treadmill," the unchecked habituation and adaptation to the circumstances of life where increases in material goods and income effects on subjective well-being seem to be rather short-lived and luring.

In conclusion, while mindfulness appears to be a panacea, it is important to stress that mindfulness without ethical teachings can lead into what Buddhist commentators call the wrong kind of mindfulness pointing out to the potential limitations of understanding mindfulness as mere "bare attention". In Buddhism "right mindfulness" involves mindfulness joined together with diligence and clear comprehension and directed towards the purpose of doing good things. As such mindfulness in Buddhism is often associated with loving kindness

meditation directed towards all beings. This in turn enables a sort of awakening of an ecological conscience that redefines humanity as part of nature, rather than its external conqueror, a predisposition essential for citizen-driven sustainability. In relation to the various applications of these approaches have argued that, "which include, among other things, the discrimination of wholesome and unwholesome qualities as well as ethics and by extension our educational system.