being-with, letting go: mindfulness

Susan Walsh
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

The expectation I bring to each moment may need to be shattered, even arrested, in order for me to hear a new song. . .

I am invited into [the] mystery of being physically present. It is not a place I can contrive, but a space to be opened up to, a place to sit in with open hands and bare feet. (Snowber, 1999: 23)

perfect calm
being with
relaxing into
being present

like when we pick sweetgrass
on a warm August day talking
looking for purple roots not talking
inhaling the scent noticing
the smell in the air on our fingers
wind blows sun hot
bees mosquitoes flies
blue sky dark
clouds gather to the west
and we are I am here

I am having difficulty writing about mindfulness today
yesterday it is hard to write about something so escapable nebulous
hard to describe and maybe that’s it staying with something
going into it softening breathing into it opening into a
space that is so often covered over with clutter chatter the play
of the mind I take off my sock and pick at my toe nail polish the
rhinestone that the esthetician put there when I had a
pedicure think about eating chocolate and the pain in my
upper back the tension I get when I sit at the computer I pick up books mark pages write on bits of paper list characteristics of mindfulness make a mess of my office floor admonish myself for not being disciplined wonder what people will say about the lack of work I am doing not doing realize I have a headache realize that I need to write about this go into it accept the process stay with it stop judging (there is an in-between time & space of being& knowing that is neither there nor there but here)

Mindfulness as a subjective state, a different way of being&knowing for many of us in the Western world, is characterized by a depth and breadth not found in what Klein (1995) refers to as the two dimensionality, the flatness, of either a modernist self or a poststructural subjectivity (84-85). She problematizes the notion of a conscious self-directed individual and also that of a being buffeted by language/discourse and attempts to work in a different kind of a space between and beyond these—a “subjective space not confined inside the body, because to go deep enough ‘inside’ is also sometimes to touch a point that connects with a vast neither-external-nor internal-world” (85). Mindfulness, then, involves opening and reboundarying, a recasting of being&knowing. It is a bodyspiritmind practice of nonjudgmental witnessing, a calm centeredness and stillness, a sense of connectedness beyond what poses as the boundaries of the individual and the limits of her body.

Mindfulness is described by Klein (1995) as “the ability to sustain a calm, intense, and steady focus when one chooses to do so” (11), by Tomm (1995) as “increased attention to what is happening at any moment” (15), and by Kabat-Zinn (1994) as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (4). It is a practice anchored in physicality—a heightened and purposeful awareness of sensations, often with a focus on the breath. Varela (1999) comments that mindfulness “creates [a] space through non-action, which includes non response to language” (66), and a non attachment to ego which “enables the student to free himself from some of his habitual patterns of thought” (67).

Mindfulness, then, moves us into a different relation of bodyspiritmind. Through foregrounding breathing, and returning at all times to the ever-changing sensing body, the impermanence of thought too becomes evident. What seems gripping in the moment passes with the breath. A multidimensional space opens around experience, how we encase it in language. We notice how thought works, its habits, its familiar haunts and pathways. We observe, witness. Stay with. Zukav & Francis (2001), in their discussion of emotional awareness, provide the useful image of standing on a bridge, noticing the river beneath with care and attention, accepting where and how it flows (108-109, 276-278)—a practice of being-with, where, if we fall into the flow of the river, we get back onto the bridge, again and again.
reclaiming the body     going to the body     waking up to a different way of being & knowing

some time ago I wrote a poetry manuscript that included many references to my body various parts of it. I asked Di Brandt, then writer-in-residence in the English Department at the University of Alberta, to comment on my work. She asked why the body references were stripped of possessive pronouns — eyes, hands, wrists instead of my eyes, my hands, my wrists.

disconnectedness    disembodiment    claiming my body    if only in language    felt strangely unsafe

memories remembering
members of the self
voices images dismembered
like the woman from Fort McMurray
a single mother found
dismembered strewn in
trees and melting
snow ripped apart

from the outside she is
together arms and legs
attached she can smile
nod go to work
function while inside a
chaos of memories churn
some of it not quite reaching
the surface she searches for
pieces that fit bits to
throw away doesn’t search
too deep the ashes

Klein (1995) outlines the essentialist-poststructural debate in feminism and notes that the opposition set up in this debate is one that, in itself, replicates the body (essentialist)-mind (poststructural) split so often critiqued by Western feminists. Essentialists attempt to distinguish what is unique to woman and claim the right to define it. In so doing, they offer coherence, a centralizing impetus that transcends the particularities of context. Feminist poststructuralists argue, however, that subjectivity is constructed through discourse, that competing discourses are at work creating a multi-faceted, often conflicting and always unfinished site. The modernist ‘self’ as coherent, rational, and self-contained is called into question. Language, as discourse, is crucial. Klein engages her understanding of Buddhist traditions to help find an acceptance of both positions, a movement between and beyond the two, time and space. She goes beyond the debate itself and attempts to reconceptualize subjectivity as not just the content of “mind,” but the realization of subjective states such as mindfulness (1995: 10-11), a practice where
bodyspiritmind intertwine, where intellect steps back and the limitations of ‘categorical reasoning’ dissolve, as do the boundaries of skin (see Tomm, 1995: 36-38). Such a rebounded—unboundaried, perhaps—space problematizes the arbitrary separation of epistemology and ontology, opens possibilities for the comingling of being&knowing. Tomm (1995) writes:

An important Buddhist insight is the inseparability of ontological reality and epistemology. (16) . . . The reality of [a] perception is necessary for the reality ‘out there’ in the same way that the reality ‘out there’ is required for the perception. The dichotomy between inner consciousness and external reality is a false one in spiritual consciousness. Spiritual experiences have not been widely accepted as sources of reliable knowledge in Western culture largely because they do not include a separation between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ knowledge. (36-37)

Mindfulness, Klein says “resist[s] Western mind-body dualisms” (1995: 71)—dualisms that emerged in the 17th century with a view of ‘mind’ as conscious human thought and as separate from the natural world—a consequence of a then-emerging world view that depended increasingly on the fragmentation of complex phenomena into more easily explainable parts. The quest for Truth was bound up in two popular views—one rationalist, emanating from Plato’s work, that held that universal Truths were attainable through the logical deduction of mind—and one empirical, that held that truth could be ascertained through the derivation and analysis of observable, physical proof (see Davis & Sumara, 2000; Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000: 162-167). Mind was effectively severed too from the physical body, and associated with transcendence and spirit in the sense of moving toward ultimate Truth. Gendered assignations ensued, with woman relegated to the ‘lower’ realms of flesh (see, for example, Irigaray, 1996; Ruether, 1983; Tomm, 1995: 118; Whitford, 1994). In such a modernist view, then, the individual emerged as an isolated entity, a seemingly self-directed, coherent, male-defined, and enclosed-unto-itself kind of being.

in a yoga class practising the warrior pose the teacher tells me to move my foot out further or she’ll get the wooden spoon
shoulder and back muscles tense breathing stops I am angry
scornful afraid thoughts jumble together I think this teacher doesn’t understand yoga has a warped idea of herself in relation to us as students and memories intervene years of
dancing lessons with the yardstick close by you could be smacked if you did not turn your knees out turn your feet out
hold your arms correctly squeeze your bum together
because in highland dancing your movements are either right or wrong there is no in-between

No in-between. A way of being and knowing marked by standards that must be attained, an external focus, future orientation, disconnection from, distrust of the self, alienation from the body (through the
Educational Insights | Volume 8, Number 2, 2003 | Susan Walsh | being-with, letting go: mindfulness

body)—and something to be achieved by the coherent, rational individual. The teleological orientation that underlines much of Western epistemology & ontology emanates from the belief that pure knowledge is separate from us as experiencing subjects. An ideal to be attained. Truth and knowledge are transcendent, not immanent, divided from us and our perceptual powers as embodied beings. In such a view, the enclosed, self-responsible learner strives to fill herself up through learning her lessons ‘correctly,’ caught in an impossible cycle of never-ending not-enough. Klein (1995) warns that the ‘idolatry of ideals’ is “problematic from a Buddhist perspective when it pulls one out of the present . . . and from a feminist perspective when it overlooks women’s genuine needs and circumstances, demeans her present self, or exacerbates any tendency toward self-hatred” (77). She further notes that:

Mindfulness departs from the urge to master, override, rein in, or otherwise manipulate the self. It avoids treating the self as a territory to be conquered, governed, colonized by ideals. Insofar as the relationship to oneself sets the tone for one’s relationship to others, it is crucial to have models of self-engagement that do not denigrate or otherwise oppress. (80)

The practice of mindfulness challenges fragmented views of body and mind, being and knowing. It inspires reconfigurations where we can feel our connections to the complex living systems of the world—where a felt sense of this relationship is realized through bodyspiritmind—something that does not exist only in language, in conceptual thinking, our limited intellectual inventions—though we acknowledge through our attention how we are shaped and affected by these. Bai (2001) insists that mindfulness, through ‘non-conceptual awareness’ (91) offers us a different relationship to that which we, in the Western world, often consider outside ourselves, a way of being with sensory perceptiveness—instead of looking at which implies a split subject/object relation. Abram (1996) concurs:

To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny
its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our senses; we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being. By linguistically defining the surrounding word as a set of determinate objects, we cut our conscious, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies. (56)

For Abram (1996), the body is our presence in the world, the physical manifestation of our relationships and interactions with nature and with other people. The body is indeed “the true subject of experience” (45). It is preconceptual, exists as a means of sensing, interacting with the world, a body “underneath the anatomicized and mechanical body that we have learned to conceive, prior. . .to all our conceptions” (46). Such a phenomenological view turns the mind/body split on its head through foregrounding the body. The mind/body split, however, is still evident; a sensing body separate from conceptual ‘mind’ is possible. A feminist poststructuralist view, by contrast, sees the body, like mind, like thought, as always written, never outside of language and other forms of discourse—and always a sexed body (see, for example, Grosz, 1995: 83-101, 104; Weedon, 1997: 114-127). Body and mind are both inscribed in structures that we, as ‘written’ subjects, must work to deconstruct, an always unfinished project. In a different move, Varela (1999) combines insights from cognitive science and Eastern wisdom traditions to suggest that “embodiment entails. . .cognition dependent upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities. . .that are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological and cultural context” (11-12)—a dynamic and generative interplay between these intertwined aspects of being&knowing that reconfigures modernist and poststructural views of mind and subjectivity. Klein (1995) discusses too how each (commonly differentiated and yet undifferentiated) aspect of bodyspiritmind continuously informs and responds to the others. She illustrates the connectedness of all through the example of “the subtle consciousness that departs the body at death. . .[and that rides] on a very subtle physical form known as rlung. . .in Tibetan, prana in Sanskrit, and ch’i in Chinese and [that is] variously translated as wind, air, subtle breath, or energy” (71). The concept of ‘body’ as strictly material is called into question. For Klein, the practice of mindfulness provides access to a multidimensional realm of being&knowing through attention to ‘body.’ The physical act of breathing is at once material and metaphorical, a grounded connection to nature, the environment, through a life-sustaining exchange of gases, an extension of the boundaries of the ‘self’ as separate embodied being (1997; see also, Irigaray, 1996: 23-25, 2002: 60-64).

To inhabit our body fully, and to feel connected through it to the earthy body beneath us is to be physically grounded, able to inhabit our bodies as the mooring and support for all our activities. In this way, we move beyond the sense that we are a small, closed system, not anchored in anything but ourselves. Such physical grounding facilitates emotional grounding—the strength to hold ground and fill space; in other words, to be present with all our being. With such presence we can move past the sense that mind and body function independently of
I can’t help wondering if it is more difficult for a woman to remain in her body to ground herself there. Why would she want to? A body so variously written, so despised, at times so out of control, more difficult too for her to take responsibility for herself? Not feel like a victim?

There is a kind of coherence in returning to the body, to observing thought—increased focus and attention that foregrounds the transitoriness of physical sensations and of thought. For Klein, this is ‘visceral coherence,’ an awareness of, a being-witness-to, change. Constancy grounded in flux—and a way of being-knowing different from the ‘narrative coherence’ now made untenable by poststructuralism and its view of the subject (1995: 11, 70-71). For Varela (1999) too, coherence is changeable, something that forms and reforms as the empty, ‘virtual’ self learns and readjusts in different circumstances. He writes, “our sense of a personal I’ can be construed as an ongoing interpretative narrative of some aspects of the parallel activities in or daily lives, whence the constant shifts in forms of attention typical of our microidentities” (61). Coherence, then, is not a constant, but a variable and responsive process achieved without a stable and centralized ‘self.’ For both Varela and Klein, some form of coherence amidst change, a reconfigured sense of being-knowing.

surrounded by friends
in the labyrinth of dreams
I am aware that I
must do something
(I can’t remember what)
no one is surprised

Deborah takes me to the bathroom
makes me look in the mirror
face burned beyond recognition
skin stretched nose smeared into lips
flesh covering parts of eyes
I am terrified but can’t stop
looking at my self in the mirror
why didn’t you tell me I ask
it happens to all of us she replies
I splash with cool clear water
face returns to normal

surfacing then sobbing from someplace
deep within tears dissolving the glue that holds me together

today I am breathing and the right side of my body seems to have fallen
away where did it go? I keep breathing am aware of the shadow the absence maybe keep breathing

(someone tells me that the right side of the body represents the feminine in Chinese medicine yin energy why does the right side drop away?)

Purposeful action and choice are evident in Klein’s (1995) framing of mindfulness as “the ability to sustain a calm, intense, and steady focus when one chooses to do so” (11) and also in Kabat-Zinn’s (1994) as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (4). The choice to return to the body, to practice breathing and pay attention to the body, to embrace the discipline of observing thought, of changing perspective, and thereby rebounding bodyspiritmind. A choice, then, to move out of habit-formed ways of being&knowing in the world. To transform relations within and among.

in a different yoga class with a different teacher I am lying on my back arms stretched overhead left heel resting on top of right toe hip raised to the ceiling abdomen facing the right head turned to the left crocodile pose I can feel myself falling over don’t know where to put my head want to roll over rest wait for the others to finish and the teacher ever watchful says breathe into it observe where your body is what’s happening soften into it and I can feel my neck my upper back so tight I breathe breathe feel the resistance stay with it relax into it breathe and somewhere in that space those moments a tiny release a letting go

Notes

[1] I use the term bodyspiritmind to indicate the inseparability of these often separated three aspects of being&knowing. Later in the paper, I explore, and attempt to problematize through mindfulness, some commonly accepted categories of mind and body. I have placed spirit between body and mind to invoke a sense of spirit as integrative process. This thinking is framed by a view of spirituality as process, an acknowledgement of and a working with energy, a process that integrates what seems inside with what seems outside, the changing alignments of these, respect for life and its immanent creative powers, a movement out of, or maybe between what seems individual with what seems more communal (see Fox, 1991: 12; King, 1993: 5-7; Tomm, 1995:. 2-3). It is a process grounded in acknowledgement of what is, being open to and in the moment, a not-seeking-outside-of, a realization of connectedness within and among.

[2] The descriptions of breathing in the temple are based on my ongoing experiences of learning Aung medical qi gong (see Aung, 1994). It is through the bodyspiritmind practices of qi gong and yoga that I am expanding my understandings of mindfulness. Many dedicated students and former patients of Dr. Aung lead sessions free of charge to those who wish to learn and practice qi gong—not only locally (in Edmonton, Alberta, where Dr. Aung’s medical practice is centralized), but also nationally and internationally.

References


**About the Author**

**Susan Walsh** is currently completing her studies in Education at the University of Alberta.