

**Five Skilful Habits
An Ethics-based Mindfulness Intervention
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Introduction

Mindfulness-based (MB) psychological interventions have become a widely applied treatment modality for many psychological disorders and syndromes. Beginning with its popularized application as a program for stress reduction, MB programs expanded the toolbox for clinicians, counsellors, life and sports coaches, and skills trainers. In its inception as a treatment protocol, mindfulness was intended as a means to ease discomfort during treatment of psoriasis (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998). As positive outcomes beyond the intended goals occurred, MB interventions moved out of the realm of an adjunct treatment process and developed into a self-contained treatment process (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert & Leahy, 2007; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002) for treatment protocols.

The origins of mindfulness as a mental state lie in Buddhist philosophy (Hanh, 1999). As one of the practices along the Eight-fold Path (Hanh, 1998; Smith, 2002)² and central to the ethical practice of a lay practitioner (Hanh, 2007), it is both outcome and process in the cultivation of awareness of phenomena and experience. The practice of mindfulness includes the cultivation of bare attention, which is an ethically neutral awareness of an object, and a discernment of wholesome from unwholesome mental states and actions (Wallace, 2008). In conjunction with the practice of clear seeing (right view) and transparency of desire (right intention)—two other practices along the Eight-fold Path—mindfulness becomes the means by which the practitioner engages fully with an experience.

The translation of mindfulness, *sati*, is remembering or recollection. It is also “that which facilitates and enables memory” (Analayo, 2003). The process of recall is broadened into a bringing forward of memory traces and expanded into a future “planfulness” while held in the ground of present awareness. In this sense, skilful mindfulness is a dynamic interaction of stored and working memory powered by the intention to manifest useful and beneficial speech or action in the present moment.

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² Eight-fold path is the cultivation of clarity in views, thinking, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

The conventional understanding of mindfulness as “being in the moment” misses both the broader and deeper meaning as well as the intention of cultivating this mental state. In its current usage, to be mindful of the moment includes being aware of negative emotions, thoughts or actions without articulating the intention of such an awareness. Whereas that is a useful starting point, to develop clear comprehension of mindfulness, it is neither complete nor beneficial to stop there because it does not carry the skill of being mindful to its intended outcome of wholesomeness in speech, thought, and action.

Olendzki (Olendzki, 2008) explains that wholesome and unwholesome mental states cannot co-exist in a single moment of awareness. For skilful mindfulness to arise as a wholesome mental state, it cannot co-exist with an emergent unwholesome mental state such as rejection, desire, or denial. Inherent in this conceptualization of mindfulness is the need to discern what is wholesome and therefore consistent with the desire for wholesomeness. Axiomatic to discernment is the need to cultivate mindfulness in a framework of values and values-oriented actions, thoughts, and speech.

The Five Precepts Transformed

The five precepts for lay practitioners are the recommended ethical basis for lay Buddhist practitioners. They are often taken ceremonially as part of a commitment to follow the Middle Way of Buddhism. The difference between the approach to a moral code by Buddhists and other religions is in the form of commitment. In Buddhism, the moral code is intended to be prescriptive (practice or aspire to cultivate behaviours embodied in the precepts) whereas in most Western religions the moral code is proscriptive (behaviours that must not be indulged).

In most translations, the five precepts are formulated as proscriptive rules:

- Do not kill
- Do not steal
- Do not indulge in sensual activities (including sexual activities)
- Do not lie
- Do not indulge in intoxicants

The intention of avoiding the proscribed behaviours is to cultivate what Keown (Keown, 2005) labels virtuous behaviours embodied in self-discipline, generosity, and compassion. These behaviours, in turn, result in the development of *upaya* or skilful means in thought, speech, and action.

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh’s (Hanh, 2007) reformulation of the five precepts advances the virtue-based ethics as the cultivation of mindfulness and points to the behavioural base of each virtue. Each precept begins with the words “aware of the suffering caused by” and is followed by a set of behavioural concepts to be practiced with mindfulness of all consequences of its practice (See Appendix A for full text). The precepts thus are transformed to be not just prescriptive, but are operationalized as behaviours that strengthen with practice and are initiated by an act of mindfulness.

Keown (Keown, 2005) notes also that the precepts are intended to facilitate the transformation of individual suffering so that personal growth in virtue is possible. With the introduction by the Mahayana school of Buddhism of concepts such as altruistic conduct (the bodhisattva ideal), the practice of Buddhist moral code expanded moral discipline to include seeking the welfare of all beings. Engaged Buddhism, a school of thought developed by Thich Nhat Hanh, focuses on the practice of the precepts or Five Mindfulness Trainings in the larger societal net of politics, justice, and ecology.

The Five Precepts as an Intervention Framework

The five precepts have been proposed as a means of improving service delivery in health care organizations (Numrich, 1999). It is argued that the increasingly diverse spirituality in health care organizations calls for ethical standards that transcend the conventional Western views. The five precepts, according to Numrich, can be a source not just of guidelines that prohibit non-beneficial or harmful actions but more importantly they can be the map to enhancing the preservation of physical life, resources, sexual health, sensitive information, and the prevention of damage from behaviours generated from intoxication.

As a treatment modality, the Eight-fold Path has been used to treat addictive and HIV risk behaviour (Avants & Margolin, 2004). Compassion and the aspiration to avoid harming other beings are melded with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in a structured process that cultivates a behavioural roadmap for transforming harmful actions to self and others. Although the five precepts are not explicitly used in the intervention schema, training in ethics/morality (*sila*) are included through cultivation of right speech (awareness of dissimulation of addictive behaviours), right behaviour (actions to prevent transmission of HIV), and right livelihood (assessment of how certain ways of earning a living can increase risk, e.g. prostitution, drug dealing).

Ethics as part of Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Using evidence-based intervention protocols, symptoms that result in distressing mental states such as anxiety or depression have been treated by relaxation techniques and/or cognitive re-framing (de-catastrophizing, thought challenging, etc.). These interventions have been met with much success in reducing the exacerbation of symptoms and the successful treatment of anxiety and depression. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Interpersonal Therapy and other modalities, on their own and in conjunction with medication, have enjoyed evidence-based support for their efficacy as treatment procedures. However, the challenge of any intervention is to find the opening by which therapist and patient can enter the experience without becoming distracted or derailed by the nature of the experience itself.

A mindfulness-based philosophy of treatment has been described as a paradigm shift in treatment of psychological disorders (cf. Segal et al., 2002). The premise of mindfulness-based interventions is that the nature of our experience is related to the level of skilfulness with which that experience is met. The ease in meeting our

experience is based in attentional and intentional choices made in each moment. It is often the case that persons diagnosed with physical and/or psychological disorders experience their symptoms as persistent and often intense sensations which are difficult to manage. The tendency is to feel overwhelmed, to over-control the experience or to deflect and avoid the pain through distraction. These strategies inevitably fail as the cognitive process fails to stay ahead of the experiential.

In a mindfulness-based paradigm, a willingness to enter that experience is cultivated and requires conceptualizing sensations of the symptoms as transient, not always responsive to tried-and-true techniques, and not specifically designed to be personally inconvenient. (In Buddhist terminology, (Hanh, 1998) these can be recognized as the three Dharma Seals: impermanence, dissatisfaction, and the assumption of a fixed self). However, this can be a daunting challenge especially in cases of chronic emotional or physical pain. Thus, feeling motivated to engage in and sustain behaviours that can ease the physical and psychological distress requires a roadmap that is intuitively congruent with wellbeing and focused on increasing the skilfulness of meeting one's experience willingly.

Because the roadmap or ethical principles that facilitate health enhancing behaviours are abstract concepts, it is necessary to define the behavioural correlates. This ensures that the direction of travel is towards the development of wellbeing and the practice required to negotiate that path is appropriately focused. The psychological rationale for including an ethical framework in mindfulness-based interventions is derived from the work of Martin Seligman and colleagues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In their conceptualization, character is viewed as stable & general, shaped by settings, capable of change (increase in skilfulness), and requires enabling conditions (education, opportunity, consistent support, mentors, role models, peers) (Dahlsgaard, Peterson & Seligman, 2005). This view is congruent with the Buddhist perspective of self as emergent and cultivated through *upaya* or skilful means.

Five Mindfulness Trainings and Mindfulness-Based Symptom Management

It is possible to deliver a treatment program without any explicit reference to or practice of ethically-derived behaviours. However, in doing so, there is a risk that mindfulness, if adopted naively, can result in unintended consequences of self-focus and neglect of the interconnectedness of all beings and their behaviours. Roshi Joan Halifax (Halifax, 1993) points out that "(i)ndeed we would not have to bother with precepts at all if we were truly aware. But, alas, most of us tend to forget. We don't see how and who we really are. So the Precepts remind us, just as the teachings on our natural wholesomeness remind us."

The idea that we "forget who we really are" is particularly relevant when working with those who are caught in physically and emotionally distressing circumstances. Because much of illness continues to carry a stigma of damage, moral and physical weakness, or a myriad of interpretations of unworthiness, it is perhaps critical to be specific in the

process of cultivating behaviours that highlight the capacity for acting in a beneficial and positive manner to self and others.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings as formulated and taught by Thich Nhat Hanh (Hanh, 2007) provide that positive-focused approach to wellbeing. Beginning with Respect for Life, the trainings cultivate an understanding of the interconnectedness of all experiences through the practice of Generosity, Sexual Responsibility, Mindful Speech and Mindful Consumption (see Appendix A for the complete text). The trainings also emphasize that the over-arching concepts are aspirations which are guides, a kind of North Star, by which skilful means are cultivated. This concept of ethical living as a process of behaviours that can be trained to be congruent with a stated aspiration fits well with the theory and concepts of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and the idea of adaptive schemas for self, others, and the world.

As part of the treatment protocol of the Ottawa Mindfulness Clinic, the Five Mindfulness Trainings have been modified to reflect habits and places the emphasis on the behavioural aspect of practice. The Five Skilful Habits to be fostered in the service of wellbeing are cultivating behaviours that (1) enhance physical health to reduce mortality; (2) develop appropriate generosity; (3) increase awareness of physical and emotional boundaries; (4) cultivate compassionate speech, and (5) increase discernment in consumption of physical and emotional nourishment, including use of necessary medication treatments. These practices are integrated in the program's curriculum that teaches mindfulness of Body, Emotions, Sensations, and Thinking (an adaptation of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Hanh, 1990))

The essential intention of the first, second, fourth and fifth of the Five Mindfulness Trainings has been retained with more of an emphasis on healing oneself through self-valuing behaviours. The Third Mindfulness Training, however, presented unique issues. Because it focuses specifically on sexual relations, it was considered too narrow and perhaps not as likely to resonate with a population that is primarily middle-aged, usually in committed relationships, or too physically ill to consider sexual relationships as a primary concern.

The original intent of the third precept was a prohibition against excessive sensual indulgence. This is likely a broader and more applicable concept in the context of a treatment paradigm. Patients often refer to their difficulties in knowing when their pain threshold has been exceeded. They describe pushing themselves physically and emotionally beyond limits because of messages to "get through" or "breakthrough" the pain experience. Despite their vulnerable state, they often practice a "no pain, no gain" philosophy which only serves to exacerbate their condition or deplete their resources. It appeared that pushing the boundaries of physical and emotional tolerance was a form of over-indulgence in physical or emotional sensations and a misguided attempt at symptom management or even cure. Thus, it seemed appropriate to modify the Third Skilful Habit to reflect respect for these boundaries as a way to be more skilful in managing symptoms.

Methodology of Practice

The Ottawa Mindfulness Clinic offers Mindfulness-Based Symptom Management courses for persons diagnosed with physical pain resulting from injury or conjoint with medical diseases, emotionally-based disorders such as mood and anxiety disorders, grief, work- or family-related stress reactions. The program is an 8-week course with one full day session conducted halfway through the course. Each class is 2-2.5 hours and begins with a guided meditation followed by an exploration of the home practice from the week before. The curriculum is based on the four foundations of mindfulness which develops mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind and concepts generated in the mind. For didactic ease, the ways to establish mindfulness are presented as practice with the body, emotions, sensations (physical and emotional), and thinking (cognitive processes).

Each week participants in the program are invited to focus on one aspect of their experience. In the first set of practices, they are guided in awareness of the physical nature of their experience by focusing on the parts of the body using the Body Scan as a meditation tool. Through this practice discernment of the physical part of the body from the feeling/thinking aspects is cultivated. For example, discerning the awareness of the knee or joint from the sensations of arthritis-related pain sensation or awareness of the body in a lying position is cultivated in the presence of any sensations that may arise from the lying down position. Further practices involve noticing the cognitive distractions that may occur taking the practitioner away from the object of meditation. Compassionate awareness of the wandering mind and gentle returning to the object of focus is practice to break the cycles of self-criticism and shame (Gilbert, 2005). Each week a different way to establish mindfulness is chosen until the four ways are integrated in the penultimate class on compassion and loving kindness.

Folded into the four ways to establish mindfulness, the five skilful habits form a behavioural focus for the home practice. Table 1 illustrates the protocol for each week when practitioners focus on cultivating specific habits in the context of mindfulness of the Body, Emotions, Sensations, and Thoughts. At the end of each class, practitioners identify specific behaviours they are willing to become more aware of or willing to practice over the week. For example, if awareness of the body is the theme for the week, practitioners may select behaviours related to facilitating physical health such as using medication regularly (especially pain relief medication), resting as an act of generosity, establishing and respecting physical boundaries when effortful work is necessary, cultivating encouraging and compassionate internal and external speech, and eating in a way that is consistent with good nourishment or not indulging in activities such as reading materials or watching TV programs that may be discouraging and negative in tone.

To practice skilfulness in each segment or column seemingly independent of other segments of experience seems artificial at first because the total experience of physicality and emotionality arises out of a sensorial whole of body and mind. However, most participants present their experience as a fused whole unable to

differentiate a healthy body from a distressed reaction to what is evolving in the body. Thus, a gentle deconstruction of the experience into its component parts is useful and eventually beneficial to a fuller understanding of the nature of their individual experience.

Exemplars of Skilful Habits

A survey of past participants was conducted to investigate what formal and informal practices were retained³. There was a 10% response to the request for participation (14 out of 140 participants responded). One of the questions asked respondents to list the habits they continued to cultivate in their ongoing practice. Table 2 lists the behaviours participants chose to practice during the course. Of the 14 participants who responded to this question in the survey of course graduates, 4-7 indicated they practiced these behaviours at least once a month. Comments by the participants who responded indicated the skilful habits are also incorporated into everyday activities:

Yoga; exercise; good sleep; focusing on my breath/body while exercising; diaphragm (deep) breathing; remembering to trust self more (“less worry – resentment – anger to self and/or others”); “Brain Gym”; mini-trampoline; cognitive thought-stopping; mindful eating; a good therapist; workshops/retreats; better awareness and “being able to distinguish between my stories and the here and now.”

It was also noteworthy that one participant indicated a renewed spiritual connection with her/his faith.

“... through mindfulness I have been able to find God again and I do pray but I believe this is a mindful exercise”.

Continuing Practice

As Eastern concepts such as mindfulness gain in currency, most commonly held beliefs about the psychology of human behaviour and the applications that derive from those beliefs are being challenged. The insertion of a base of ethics to a treatment process presents a particular challenge to the view that psychological interventions are required to be value-free and it is tempting to avoid the potential of censure. However, teaching mindfulness as a disembodied practice not only misrepresents its intent but also reduces it to a tool whose misuse could lead to more harm than good. Placed and practiced in its context of transforming the suffering self, the way of mindfulness becomes a process through which the individual can embody a generative and sustaining approach to creating internal and external coherence.

³ The research was conducted by Ms. Catherine Shaw as part of a practicum course at Carleton University Department of Psychology.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings are creative in their simplicity and secularity. There are few who would argue against practicing how to respect one's mortality, become more generous, use one's resources in a sustainable way, speak with compassion, and be physically and emotionally ecologically-minded in all activities. The appeal of the Mindfulness Trainings is in their encouragement to engage in the process of becoming aware of intended and unintended consequences before engaging in an action or thought. That is, they are not about right or wrong actions but about cultivating oneself so that there is a seamless continuity of awareness and a progression in skilfulness.

The adaptation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings to reflect more strongly the behavioural aspects of practice has been a useful and beneficial component of the overall Mindfulness-Based interventions offered at the Ottawa Mindfulness Clinic. As the Five Skilful Habits, they have provided a formal guide to the development of mindfulness and taken some of the mystery out of the details of how to practice. By providing a clear focus in each week of an ethically-derived way to establish mindfulness, the skills accrue in strength and are more easily re-directed towards healthy choices.

Table 1: Five Skilful Habits in the context of the four ways to establish mindfulness

Skilful Habit to train	BODY	EMOTIONS	SENSATIONS	THOUGHTS
Skilful sustaining of life				
Skilful use of resources (Generosity)				
Skilful attention to boundaries				
Skilful speech				
Skilful consumption				

Table 2: Examples of behaviours selected by participants to practice in each foundation of mindfulness

	BODY 7/14	EMOTIONS 6/14	SENSATIONS 4/14	THOUGHTS 7/14
Skilful sustaining of life	Health-related (e.g. while eating, paying attention to body)	Attend to emotional suffering Established a formal gratitude practice	Observe (“tune in”) Try not to avoid pain	Attend to underlying pain when thinking “violent” thoughts
Generosity	Exercise Rest	Non-violent communication (speech/thoughts) to identify responsibility Charitable donations	Listening Eating slowly	Compassion, self-empathy, focusing Tapas acupuncture technique
Skilful Attention to Boundaries	Saying “no” Taking time for self and others Taking breaks, not over-exerting self	Expressing emotions in ways not be harmful to self or others	Reduce and deal with negative events/emotions	Expressing gratitude Noticing good in life
Skilful Speech	Being non-judgmental about health-related choices	Express and allow emotions to exist Express self in non-harmful ways (choose words carefully and aware of intentions behind words)	Listening	Let go of negative thoughts Welcome thoughts but let them pass Watch “train” (thoughts) pass and refocus on now More sensitive to others, less critical
Skilful Consumption	Not eating foods that are hard to digest (healthy choices)	(no participants provided examples here)	Eating slowly	More relaxed More positive Accepting “this is me”

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APPENDIX A

THE FIVE MINDFULNESS TRAININGS (Hanh, 2007)

The First Training: Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life.

The Second Training: Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression, I vow to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants and minerals. I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on earth.

The Third Training: Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

The Fourth Training: Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord; or words that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

The Fifth Training: Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body and my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self transformation and the transformation of society.