



Mindfulness – much ado about nothing?

A public talk by Jon Kabat-Zinn – a first hand account & reflections

By [Juliet Adams](#), webmaster for [Mindfulnet.org](#)

On a gloomy autumnal weekday evening in November 2010, over 600 people gathered expectantly at a conference centre on an industrial estate on the outskirts of Oxford, to listen to a talk about mindfulness. Not just any talk about mindfulness, but a talk by an extraordinary man called Jon Kabat-Zinn.

I arrived early, found a chair and sat down, fiddled with my mobile phone, took out my notebook, scabbled around for a pen in my tardis like handbag, before idly scanning the room for faces I recognised. Only after a few moments did I notice that I was sitting a couple of seats away from a deep in meditation Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Jon Kabat-Zinn is regarded by many as the father of modern day mindfulness practices. Jon's life work has been largely dedicated to bringing mindfulness into the mainstream of medicine and society. He has made significant contributions to modern health care with his research which focused on mind/body interactions for healing, and on various clinical applications of mindfulness training for people with chronic pain and/or stress-related disorders.

Jon Kabat-Zinn is the founding Executive Director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and its renowned Stress Reduction Clinic.

He teaches mindfulness and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in various venues around the world.. He is the author of many best selling books on mindfulness.

Leaving Jon to his mindfulness practice, I caught snippets of conversation from rapidly growing crowd. Many had travelled long distances to attend. Many came from a medical and therapeutic background. There seemed to be a good mix of people who actively practiced mindfulness and embedded it in their everyday lives, and those who had heard about mindfulness and wanted to use it with clients or patients. There was a buzz of excitement in the air and much talk of what mindfulness could offer, and the extent to which it was becoming mainstream.



By the time Jon started talking, there were around 600 people in the hall – far more than the organisers – [The Oxford Centre for cognitive therapy](#) had expected.

Increased interest in mindfulness

Jon started his talk by scanning the room with a wry smile. “This would not have happened 5 yrs ago. People are yearning for a deep connection with ourselves in a way that nurtures and heals..” “Many premier universities around the world now have centres for mindfulness. There’s something happening that’s extraordinary”.

Funding for mindfulness research has dramatically increased which has contributed to the volume of medical and scientific research on mindfulness increasing exponentially. In 1979 (when Jon



started teaching MBSR¹), the fact that NIH was funding research on mindfulness was virtually inconceivable. 25 years later (2004) NIH² held a conference on mindfulness at a deep scientific level. Jon commented “what a difference 25 years makes!” Jon reflected “What we know now is a kindergarten of what we will know in twenty-five years time.”

Much ado about nothing

Jon went on to say that “Mindfulness has an appearance of being much ado about nothing, but it’s actually much ado about almost nothing but is really much ado about almost everything.”....

“Many premier universities around the world now have centres for mindfulness. There’s something happening that’s extraordinary”.

“Mindfulness is about befriending and listening in on who we are, and surrendering the incredible burden of who we think we are. It’s a radical act to stop, drop in on yourself for a moment and stop. It’s a radical act of sanity and a radical act of love.”

Jon challenged the audience to unlock the potential of meditation to “ignite a passion for our own interior potential” to “investigate if our body really has its ear to the rail” reflecting that “we almost never inhabit the present moment.”

Jon mused on how medicine is all about fixing things, but not all problems can get fixed, and how western science, medicine, dharma are becoming interconnected for the good of humanity.

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He provoked thought and reflection with comments like

“A text book has not been written on what’s possible”

“Death is not the problem - we’re more afraid of living - it’s a challenge! What else is there to do on this planet? If you are not busy living, we’re busy dying”. “We need to start paying attention to our minds.”

“Our favourite visiting place is the future - the worry and the planning!”

“Mindfulness is a way of being and feeling younger”

“We (humans) are the samurai warriors of thought - but what about awareness? When did you ever get any training in awareness?”

“Death is not the problem - we’re more afraid of living - it’s a challenge! What else is there to do on this planet? If you are not busy living, we’re busy dying. We need to start paying attention to our minds.”

The audience were clearly hooked. Jon’s unassuming manner, knowledge, experience and passion for his subject presented a compelling argument for the benefits of mindfulness for both ourselves and society as a whole. Jon placed a strong emphasis on experiencing mindfulness for ourselves rather than intellectualising it. He invited the audience to take part in some short mindfulness exercises, and afterwards encouraged us all to share our experiences. For some the

¹ MBSR stands for Mindfulness based stress reduction

² NIH is the National Institute for Health, an agency of the US Government



experience was dramatic and emotional, for others it ignited interest, and a desire to discover more.

From a personal perspective, attending talks, conferences, training and other mindfulness events, I often find that many people get interested in mindfulness for what it can do for others. Some seem to miss the point that they need to apply mindfulness to themselves first and foremost before considering helping others to become more mindful.

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I'm guilty of this myself. On my first MBSR course I "got it" intellectually. It took around a year, sporadic practice and another MBSR course before I really "got it" at a heart and soul level, and it became embedded as part of my life, work and thought processes. Luckily for me, Jon and his colleagues had paved the way for me. Jon's pathway took him altogether longer.....

Why Mindfulness?

Jon came from a scientific family. As a young man he considered working in Physics, then Chemistry (where he completed a PhD in Molecular Biology with a Nobel Laureate). Whilst working he regularly meditated. Over a ten year period he searched for his 'calling'. He repeatedly asked himself "what is my job on the planet". He asked himself "what would I pay to do".

During a retreat in 1979 it struck him that what the world was calling for was exactly what he was doing - but not in the format he was doing or using the language he was using. He concluded that he needed to make meditation "American". He studied all forms of meditation to try and find out what learning could be offered to anyone (especially those who didn't know they needed it).

Why stress reduction?

Jon reflected that hospitals are the places that people go when they are suffering, and he found that many people were falling through the cracks in the health service. He spoke to medics, asking them how many people they felt that they actually helped. The answer was only around 15%. Medics told him that they helped a small number, some of the others got better, some helped themselves but some could not be helped at all.

Patients told the clinic that Jon's 8 week Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) classes had done more for them in 8 weeks than conventional medicine had done in 8 years...

Jon offered the medics an alternative place to send people who they could not help. The hospital allowed him to set up a clinic in the form of classes in mindfulness. He called it the Stress Reduction clinic.

Jon commented that naming the clinic "the Stress Reduction clinic" was the right term at the time, and although not correct scientifically, everyone could relate to it. "Many people were coming to the hospital in pain, and as a result were not able to work, and medically this was not being dealt with". "No one was doing the full package - mind, heart & body. This was the start of the stress reduction clinic". Patients told the clinic that his 8 week Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) classes had done more for them in 8 weeks than conventional medicine had done in 8 years.



The future of Mindfulness

So what of Mindfulness in the future? Mindfulness is now being used in schools, universities, diverse workplaces, in Medicine, in therapy and even in prisons. Mindfulness is now regularly in the news, and more and more widely researched. We have Jon to thank for much of this.

“Integrating mindfulness into society is not the job of the Dalai Lama, it’s not up to me, and it’s up to you.”

Although some newspapers portray mindfulness as a passing fad, I agree with Jon that “a text book has not been written on what’s possible”. Neuroscience, especially the field of neuroplasticity is proving this already. Until fairly recently science regarded the brain as largely immutable and fixed. We are now discovering that the brain has the capability to change by re wiring itself through the power of thought. Research demonstrates that mindfulness practices improve attention and awareness. Mindfulness helps us recognise our thoughts and *choose* how we respond to them, rather than respond on autopilot. In effect we change our mind to change our brain to change our mind. The possibilities for self development and well being are limitless!

As Jon said in his two day workshop that followed the public talk, *“Integrating mindfulness into society is not the job of the Dalai Lama, it’s not up to me, and it’s up to you.”*

My interest in mindfulness is very much on a practical level. In many ways I regard it as a form of brain training, although its much more than that. I am not Buddhist, I am not a nun, I am not a mindfulness teacher, and I am far from perfect! I have a full time, demanding job working with senior managers and business leaders on real life business challenges. Mindfulness helps me achieve focus and balance in my busy work and home life. My attempt to help integrate mindfulness into society is by running and updating the secular mindfulness information website Mindfulnet (www.mindfulnet.org) in my spare time. Its aim is making information on mindfulness more accessible (especially to new comers and busy people).

Do you practice mindfulness? Teach mindfulness? Integrate it into your work with clients? How can *you* help mindfulness become more fully embedded in everyday life?

Mindfulness – is it much ado about nothing? If embraced, I agree with Jon – its much ado about almost everything.

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