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ESSAYS

Organizing for Mindfulness

Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge

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An enriched view of mindfulness, jointly informed by Eastern and Western thinking, suggests that attentional processes in organizing have been underspecified. Respecification of attention in the context of classical views of mindfulness results in a perspective that features diminished dependence on concepts, increased focus on sources of distraction, and greater reliance on acts with meditative properties. Enriched mindfulness reveals the reality of impermanence and the necessity for continuous organizing to produce wise action.

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A sign on the wall of a machine shop run by the New York Central Railroad reads, "Be where you are with all your mind."[1] If one assumes that "order or confusion of society corresponds to and follows, the order or confusion of individual minds" (Thera, 1996, p. 22), then the New York Central is moving in the right direction by trying to reduce confusion and mistakes through greater

mindfulness. But exactly what they are moving toward is unclear, because mindfulness means something quite different in Eastern and Western thought.

In Eastern thought, to be where you are with all your mind means to pay more attention to internal processes of mind rather than to the contents of mind. Eastern mindfulness means having the ability to hang on to current objects; remember them; and not lose sight of them through distraction, wandering attention, associative thinking, explaining away, or rejection. As described in the *Abhidhamma*, the Buddhist analysis of mind and mental processes, mindfulness has "the characteristic of not wobbling, i.e. not floating away from the object. Its function is absence of confusion or non-forgetfulness" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 86). Commentators have noted that the image of "not wobbling" is meant to convey the quality that mindfulness "keeps the mind as steady as a stone instead of letting it bob about like a pumpkin in water" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 371). To wobble in perceiving an object is to acquiesce in its conceptual associations before total awareness and nonforgetfulness can occur. Not wobbling is characteristic of powerful mindfulness and, in combination with one-pointed concentration, produces penetrative insights or wisdom.

In Western thought, to be where you are with all your mind means to pay more attention to external events and to the content of mind, these contents including things such as past associations, concepts, reifications, and semblances of sensed objects (DeCharms, 1998). Ellen Langer's (1989) work is representative of Western treatments of mindfulness. She describes mindfulness as (a) active differentiation and refinement of existing distinctions (p. 138); (b) creation of new discrete categories out of the continuous streams of events that flow through activities (p. 157); and (c) a more nuanced appreciation of context and of alternative ways to deal with it (p. 159).

To see more clearly the organizational complexities associated with mindfulness, consider Robert Chia's (2005) insightful description of managing. "Managing is firstly and fundamentally the task of becoming aware, attending to, sorting out, and prioritizing an inherently messy, fluxing, chaotic world of competing demands that are placed on a manager's attention. It is creating order out of chaos. It is an art, not a science. Active perceptual organization and the astute allocation of attention is a central feature of the managerial task" (p. 1092). This description seems to capture Western conceptual mindfulness quite well.

Acts of managing are seen to sort competing demands, prioritize those demands, and create order out of chaos. Sorting and prioritizing are acts of differentiation and conceptualizing. Demands are a cluster of experiences gathered into a concept. And the creation of order is an act that ignores impermanence, instills a belief in permanence, yields to a craving for predictability, and perhaps produces clinging. Attempts to create order freeze a dynamic reality into something that people then cling to. The ordering and clinging are useful and necessary for managing, but the dominant action is still clinging, and the order is still subject to inevitable rise and fall, and the rise and fall of order is still the occasion for stress, tension, and anger. But Chia's description also implies change, acceptance of flux and impermanence, avoidance of a static self, awareness of workings of the mind, attention directed both outward and inward, and preoccupation with here and now. These implications suggest managing that is more mindful and less infused with conceptualizing.

Under the assumption that "all things are preceded by the mind" (Wallace, 1999, p. 185), it is important that organizational scholars have a deeper understanding of mindfulness, both as a practice to improve their own minds and inquiries and as a template to judge the potential effects of organized activity on capabilities for mindful perception, choice, and action. In this essay, we selectively examine both Eastern and Western views of mindfulness as they converge on organizational issues. We take note of overlooked properties that are potentially relevant to organizational scholars. We speculate about possible effects when these properties are added to inquiring and inquiries.

EASTERN PERSPECTIVES ON MINDFULNESS

Eastern lines of thinking about mindfulness are grounded in Buddhism. Buddhism "suggests means of enhancing attentional stability and clarity, and of then using these abilities in the introspective examination of conscious states to pursue the fundamental issues concerning consciousness itself" (Wallace, 2005, p. 5). The core of the Buddha's message is "Be mindful" (Thera, 1996, p. 23). Mindfulness is said to be the core because "In its elementary manifestation, known under the term 'attention,' it [mindfulness] is one of the cardinal functions of consciousness without which there

cannot be perception of any object at all." The Four Foundations of Mindfulness answer the questions: "To be mindful of What, To be mindful of How" (Thera, 1996, p. 24). The four, and only four, foundations of mindfulness are introspective awareness of: body, feelings, consciousness, and mental objects. The development of mindfulness with time is learning the skill of dampening down "internal attention wobbling." Mindfulness is important, because it counteracts an undisciplined mind. An undisciplined mind comes from a combination of habituation, mindlessness, laxity, and scattered attention. If left in this condition, a mind is an unreliable instrument for examining mental objects, processes, and the nature of consciousness (Wallace, 1999, p. 176). Remedies for an unreliable instrument proposed in Eastern thought work directly on attentional processes such as scatter, vividness, duration, a focus on the present, and the letting go of concepts. Generally, Eastern mental development proceeds from an emphasis on virtue to concentration to mindfulness; from grosser to more subtle levels of mind. Virtue involves changing unskillful states of mind to skillful states and then maintaining the skillful states. Actions that are motivated by one of the three mental toxins—greed, hatred, or delusions—are unskillful. Actions motivated by generosity, loving kindness, or clarity of mind are the skillful antidotes to the three toxins. Concentration and mindfulness work together to control attention. Concentration excludes mental hindrances or interferences leading to a calmer, focused mind. Mindfulness notes when we lose either our momentary focus or longer term focus and reminds us to refocus. The most effective but effortful way to work directly on attentional processes is to develop virtue, concentration, and mindfulness concurrently.

The nature of mindfulness is implicit in the original Pali word for mindfulness, *Sati.* (Pali is the Prakrit language in which Buddhist philosophy and psychology were first written). Sati "derives from a root meaning [in Pali] 'to remember,' but as a mental factor it signifies presence of mind, attentiveness to the present, rather than the faculty of memory regarding the past" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 86). As noted earlier, mindfulness is the mental ability to hang on to current objects by bringing wandering (wobbling) attention back to the intended object.

A glimpse of Eastern mindfulness is found in the thin slices of perception that precede conceptualizing. "When you first become aware of something, there is

a fleeting instant of pure awareness just before you conceptualize the thing, before you identify it. That is a state of awareness. Ordinarily this state is short lived. It is that flashing split second. . . just before you objectify it, clamp down on it mentally, and segregate it from the rest of existence. . . . That flowing, soft-focused moment of pure awareness is mindfulness. . . . Mindfulness is very much like what you see with your peripheral vision as opposed to the hard focus of normal or central vision. Yet this moment of soft, unfocussed awareness contains a very deep sort of knowing that is lost as soon as you focus your mind and objectify the object into a thing. In the process of ordinary perception, the mindfulness step is so fleeting as to be unobservable. We have developed the habit of squandering our attention on all the remaining steps, focusing on the perception, cognizing the perception, labeling it, and most of all, getting involved in a long string of symbolic thought about it. . . . It is the purpose of vipassana meditation to train us to prolong that moment of awareness" (Gunaratana, 2002, p. 138).

Formally, "Mindfulness is moment-to-moment, nonreactive, nonjudgmental awareness. . . . You don't seek such an experience or turn it into a concept. You just sit, not pursuing anything, and insights come up on their own timetable, out of stillness and out of spacious open attention without any agenda other than to be awake" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002, p. 69). Meditation or mental development focuses on three sets of internal mental objects that are relevant for developing mindfulness: Factors of Sense Contact (sense-contact, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness), Factors of Absorption (thought, examination, rapture, pleasure, and mental one-pointedness (concentration), and Faculties (faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, mind, joy, and vitality; Thera, 1998).The significance of these three groups is that both the factors within a group and the groups themselves are in linear development order. The factors are also holographic and improvement in one factor improves all the other factors. The holographic effect is strongest within a group, because the group has an overall function. The overall functions for the groups in order are Sense Contact, Concentration, and Mindfulness. The factors in the first group are present in every moment of consciousness and therefore embody everyday thinking. Those who follow intellectual pursuits (e.g., academics) intensify concentration as they develop the second group, but only those who move beyond Western psychology and cultivate the first

five factors of the third group—the so-called Spiritual Faculties—develop transformational mindfulness. The third set is dependent on faith in the meditation process and extreme effort, which lead to stronger mindfulness and deeper concentration which in turn induce insights and wisdom.

A simple analogy for the way mindfulness works is the movie theater:

> When we are watching the screen, we are absorbed in the momentum of the story, our thoughts and emotions manipulated by the images we are seeing. But if just for a moment we were to turn around and look toward the back of the theater at the projector, we would see how these images are being produced. We would recognize that what we are lost in is nothing more than flickering beams of light. Although we might be able to turn back and lose ourselves once again it the movie, its power over us would be diminished. The illusion-maker has been seen. Similarly, in mindfulness meditation, we look deeply into our own movie-making process. We see the mechanics of how our personal story gets created, and how we project that story onto everything we see, hear, taste, smell, think, and do. (Niskar, 1998, p. 26)

To develop fuller mindfulness, people need to learn both where to focus attention and how to focus attention. Guidelines for doing so are described in the four frames of mindfulness (Sati*patthana*; Thanissaro, 1996, p. 72). *Sati* means mindfulness. And *patthana* means foundation, condition, or source, which refers to the object that is kept in mind as a frame of reference for giving context to one's experience (i.e., where to focus attention). The word *satipatthana* can also be seen as a compound of *sati* and *upatthana*, which means establishing or setting near; thus referring to the approach or the how of keeping something loosely in mind; of maintaining a solid frame of reference (in the present). Both the proper object and proper approach are crucial for getting the proper results (mindfulness).

Thanissaro (1996) further clarifies that if one takes the breath as the frame, "One remains focused on the breath in and of itself—ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed (desire) and distress with reference to the world" (p. 74). Four key terms in this description are the following:

> Remaining focused—keeping track, staying with one object out of the many competing for attention; thus an element of concentration.

> Ardent—a factor of effort or exertion, which contains an element of discernment (wise attention) so as to stay with skillful mental qualities.
> Alert—being clearly aware of what is happening in the present; also an element of discernment.
> Mindful—being able to remember or recollect. Here it means keeping one's task in mind. Specifically, to remain focused on one's frame of reference and putting aside the distractions of greed and distress that come from shifting one's attention back to the narratives and world views that make up one's sense of the world.

In essence, being ardent, alert, and mindful foster concentration much the same as Thera's (1998) second Abhidhamma group. "*Mindfulness* keeps the theme of meditation in mind. *Alertness* observes the theme as it is present to awareness and also is aware when the mind has slipped from its theme. *Mindfulness* then remembers where the mind should be focused and *ardency* tries to return the mind to its proper theme as quickly and skillfully as possible" (Thanissaro, 1996, p. 75). These three qualities help shield the mind from its normal sensual preoccupations and unskillful mental qualities, thus steadily improving concentration and mindfulness.

Qualities of Organizational Experience

A crucial input to organizational theorizing is what has been called "the cardinal Buddhist meditation" (Thera, 1996, p. 26): All phenomena are seen as impermanent, liable to suffering, and void of substance or ego.

> Insight is the direct and penetrative realization of the Three Characteristics of Existence, i.e. Impermanence, Suffering, and Impersonality. It is not a mere intellectual appreciation or conceptual knowledge of these truths, but an indubitable and unshakeable experience of them, obtained and matured through repeated meditative confrontation with the facts underlying those truths. (Thera, 1996, p. 44)

Although unshakeable experience of these characteristics does not occur until advanced stages in the development of mindfulness (Goleman, 1988), people do develop a deeper appreciation of them as they focus their attention internally in a systematic manner. This growing appreciation of the three characteristics is crucial because it makes it easier for people to

let go of events, ideas, and identities to which they have been clinging.

One rendering of what this growth is like is the following:

[Novice meditators] begin to have insight into what the mind, as it is experienced, is really like. Experiences, they notice, are impermanent. This is not just the leaves-fall, maidens-wither, and kings-are-forgotten type of impermanence (traditionally called gross impermanence) with which all people are hauntingly familiar but a personal penetrating impermanence of the activity of the mind itself. Moment by moment new experiences happen and are gone. It is a rapidly shifting stream of momentary mental occurrence. Furthermore, the shiftiness includes the perceiver as much as the perceptions. There is no experiencer, just as Hume noticed, who remains constant to receive experiences, no landing platform for experience. This actual experiential sense of no one home is called selflessness or egolessness. Moment by moment the meditator also sees the mind pulling away from its sense of impermanence and lack of self, sees it grasping experiences as though they were permanent, commenting on experiences as though there were a constant perceiver to comment, seeking any mental entertainment that will disrupt mindfulness, and restlessly fleeing to the next preoccupation, all with a sense of constant struggle. This undercurrent of restlessness, grasping, anxiety, and unsatisfactoriness that pervades experience is called Dukkha, usually translated as suffering or stress. Suffering arises quite naturally and then grows as the mind seeks to avoid its natural grounding in impermanence and lack of self. (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1993, pp. 60-61)

Mindfulness is said to be fully developed when there is ongoing awareness that "(a) all conditioned [i.e., caused] things are inherently transitory; (b) every worldly thing is, in the end, unsatisfying; and, (c) there are really no entities that are unchanging or permanent, only processes" (Gunaratana, 2002, p. 144). These are the qualities of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and the selflessness of phenomena.

Impermanence is the quality of experience that everything is shifting, going to pieces, slowly dissolving, rising and falling, and that moment-to-moment experience is all there is (Gunaratana, 2002). Thoughts, for example, are experienced "as temporary phenomena without inherent worth or meaning, rather than as necessarily accurate reflections of reality, health, adjustment, or worthiness" (Baer, 2003, p. 130). To understand impermanence is also to understand that all mental fabrications have a feeling tone which is positive, negative, or neutral. Once mental feelings tones are fused with concepts, people then cling to concepts associated with a positive feeling tone, reject the concepts associated with a negative feeling tone, and ignore concepts associated with a neutral tone. All three reactions blind people to the inevitable rise and fall of events and the dissatisfaction that clinging produces.

Unsatisfactoriness is the sense of fearfulness—fearfulness because "whatever is impermanent provides no stable sense of security and thus is to be feared" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 351). The mere fact of impermanence does not in itself necessarily cause suffering. But what does cause suffering is that people become attached to impermanent things and suffer when they disappear. As stated in *A Comprehensive of Abhidhamma*, "Suffering is the mode of being continuously oppressed by rise and fall" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 346). Oppression stems from a "self-centered attempt to make things and relationships permanent or to have them be just the way we want for our own selfish motives" (Magid, 2002, p. 141).

The third quality of existence, selflessness, refers to the nonexistence of an unchanging self (Gunaratana, 2001, p. 196). "I" is a concept that is added to experience. But what it adds is a conceptual gap between reality and awareness of that reality. When people refer to a stable "me" identified with permanent qualities, they "have taken a flowing vortex of thought, feeling, and sensation and solidified that into a mental construct. . . . Forever after, we treat it as if it were a static and enduring entity. . . . We view it as a thing separate from all other things. . . . We ignore our inherent connectedness to all other beings and decide that 'I' have to get more for me; then we marvel at how greedy and insensitive human being are. . . and we grieve over how lonely we feel" (Gunaratana, 2002, p. 37).

To see the difference these three qualities can make in organizational life, consider the concept of commitment (e.g., Salancik, 1977). To become committed is to make a public irrevocable choice, cling to it, and justify that clinging by means of self-vindicating reasons. Acts of commitment often increase attachment to an object. And self-justification of these attachments strengthens a fixed identity for self. Fearfulness and dissatisfaction are triggered when justified actions begin to disintegrate and throw doubt on the justifier, the justifications, and the commitment itself. The more we

strive for behavioral commitment, the less mindful we become. To pull the plug on a commitment is to reaffirm impermanence, diminish attachment, and dissolve a self defined by the commitment. To move toward nonattachment and less suffering "doesn't mean giving up the things of the world, but accepting that they go away" (Magid, 2002, p. 141).

WESTERN PERSPECTIVES ON MINDFULNESS

Ellen Langer's description of mindfulness is representative of Western thinking and has been adopted by several organizational researchers (e.g., Fiol & O'Connor, 2003; Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld, 1999).

As noted earlier, Langer (1989) argues that mindfulness has three characteristics: (a) active differentiation and refinement of existing distinctions (p. 138); (b) creation of new discrete categories out of the continuous streams of events that flow through activities (p. 157); and (c) a more nuanced appreciation of context and of alternative ways to deal with it (p. 159). Stated more compactly, "mindfulness is a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context" (Langer, 2000, p. 220). Langer's original view of mindfulness is more conceptual; her newer version is less so. Nevertheless, her primary focus is on "active distinction making and differentiation" (Thornton & McEntee, 1995, p. 252). People act less mindfully when they rely on past categories, act on "automatic pilot," and fixate on a single perspective without awareness that things could be otherwise.

Langer describes her ideas as grounded in research and a Western perspective, focused on learning to switch modes of thinking (from mindless to mindful) rather than on meditation and concerned with the process of noticing new things that involves both seeing similarities in things thought different and differences in things thought similar (Langer, 2005, p. 16). Her interventions to reduce mindlessness tend to promote discrimination of subtle cues that had gone unnoticed before. When these cues are noticed, routines that had been unfolding mindlessly are interrupted. What is interesting is that these interruptions by themselves may increase mindfulness. They create a void that is similar to the void induced by quiet meditation. When either type of void is created, past experience no longer serves as a firm guide and the disruption "stirs the cognitive pot." Because the void is momentarily tough to categorize and label, it can induce a moment of concept-free mindfulness.

When people draw novel distinctions in the face of disruptions, several things happen. There is "(1) a greater sensitivity to one's environment, (2) more openness to new information, (3) the creation of new categories for structuring perception, and (4) enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving. The subjective 'feel' of mindfulness is that of a heightened state of involvement and wakefulness or being in the present. . . . Mindfulness is not a cold cognitive process" (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, p. 2). These outcomes have some similarity to outcomes attributed to Eastern mindfulness. It is important to notice these similarities, because they suggest early stages in the movement toward fuller development of mindfulness, and they suggest indicators that track this development. Still, although Langer does emphasize flexible awareness in the present, she is more concerned with awareness of external events rather than inner experiences such as thoughts and emotion and more concerned with goal-oriented cognitive tasks than nonjudgmental observation (Baer, 2003).

The organizational literature tends to focus on mindfulness as content rather than mindfulness as process, a preference that would be expected, given the grounding in Western, scientific thought and in Langer's work. The literature, for example, contains claims that mindful conceptualizing can disrupt bandwagons (Fiol & O'Connor, 2003), improve coordination (Weick & Roberts, 1993), reduce the likelihood and severity of organizational accidents (Weick et al., 1999), aid information system design (Swanson & Ramiller, 2004), produce creative solutions (Langer, 2005), heighten adaptation (Vogus & Welbourne, 2003), foster entrepreneurship (Rerup, in press), and reduce stress (Davidson et al., 2003).

In most cases, these claims overlook an important issue involving process. To illustrate this oversight, consider the following description of processes associated with organizing for high reliability (Weick et al., 1999): Stable attention to failure, simplification, current operations, capabilities for resistance, and the temptation to overstructure induces a rich awareness of discriminatory detail and wise action. Now bracket all the words in the phrase that starts with the words "to failure" and ends with the words "to overstructure." Remove those words. The sentence now reads, "Stable attention induces a rich awareness of

discriminatory detail and wise action." That revised sentence raises the possibility that stable attention by itself, and not attention to specifics such as failure, simplification, or operations, may explain considerable variance in reliable performance. If that is plausible, then it means that greater awareness of how attention functions may be a precondition for greater alertness.

MINDFULNESS IN THE CONTEXT OF ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

Attempts to increase mindfulness in an organizational context are complicated, because organizations are established, held together, and made effective largely by means of concepts. Tsoukas (2005) makes this clear when he argues that generalizing is the prototypic act of organizing:

A distinguishing feature of organization is the generation of recurring behaviours by means of institutionalized roles that are explicitly defined. For an activity to be said to be organized implies that types of behaviour in types of situations are connected to types of actors. . . . An organized activity provides actors with a given set of cognitive categories and a typology of action options. . . . On this view, therefore, organizing implies generalizing; the subsumption of heterogeneous particulars under generic categories. In that sense, formal organization necessarily involves abstraction. (p. 124)

By Tsoukas's reading, the organization, its people, and its activities are mentally formed collections of direct experiences with names. Although ultimately people, selves, and organizations do not exist, conventionally, they not only exist, but they are also necessary foundations for mindfulness to come into existence. Conceptual reality is necessary for day-to-day individual and organizational functioning, and mindfulness can bring the added benefits of insights and wisdom. However, now we might predict that conceptual moves that are intended to create permanence, attachment, and distinctiveness (e.g., competitive advantage, brands) encourage people to reject or ignore concepts associated with negative and neutral feelings (e.g., uncertainty absorption) and to develop misperceptions of themselves, their work, and their context.

The most direct way to forestall conceptual moves that mislead is through mindfulness meditation. In the West, mindfulness meditation is practiced at two levels:

Today the practice of insight meditation has gained global popularity, yet in achieving this success it has undergone a subtle metamorphosis. Rather than being taught as an integral part of the Buddhist path, it is now often presented as a secular discipline whose fruits pertain more to life within the world than to supramundane release. Many meditators testify to the tangible benefits they have gained from the practice of insight meditation, benefits that range from enhanced job performance and better relationships to deeper calm, more compassion and greater awareness. (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1)

These secular benefits are those most relevant to organizations, especially greater awareness, clearer thinking and better decisions (Putnam, 2001).

There are two different starting points for meditative practice, either concentration as a vehicle or mindfulness as a vehicle with a third possibility being an integrated combination of both. These are the three main headings under which all the traditional subjects of meditation may be classified (Goleman, 1988). For example, transcendental meditation, Samadhi, Siddha Yoga, and kasina (colored disc) are concentration exercises focused on a discrete object or words leading to calmness. Gurdjieff's self-remembering and Krishnamurti's self-knowledge are mindfulness based and entail continuous, full watchfulness of each successive moment leading to insights into mental and thus physical reality. Zen (zazen) and Tibetan and Theravadan (vipassana) represent mixtures of the two, depending on the specific meditation (i.e., discrete mental object or the mind watching itself).

The significance of calmness (or concentration) and insight (or mindfulness) being paired is that you can only go so far in one without advancing in the other. Making one stronger induces or makes the potential for advancing in the other pair go up dramatically.

Insights from mindfulness meditation may arise in two ways, depending on whether attention is directed inward or outward. A characteristic of insights, when they arise, is that the resultant insight is related to the focus of meditation. Because mindfulness meditation involves attending to the mind itself, the insights will be of the nature to further

improve mental skills that benefit organizations in all the meditator's activities. A second benefit, having more to do with increased concentration than mindfulness, comes with prolonged focus directed toward organizational goals. The insights here are associated with the particular expertise of the person. Promoting mindfulness meditation to complement skillful concentration can increase the likelihood of organizational and expert specific insights.

An example of mindful fatality investigations shows how this process works. A basic observation in meditation is that your mind is always aware of some object—thus the impossibility of ever being mindless. Because people are always paying attention to something when accidents occur, that is part of what you should be looking for as an investigator. Too often, the conclusions of investigations are in the format of the victims' failure to note something important rather than on what they were attending to at crucial moments. Thus, very basic information is missing when investigators try to form a causal link between flawed behaviors (they avoid the question of "In whose view are these behaviors flawed?") and tragic outcomes. Most likely, the investigator and the victim are paying attention to the same things routinely paid attention to in their everyday lives, such as habitually thinking about food, sex, family, sports, image, stresses, and so on as they perform their tasks. Not only is mindfulness central to better performance, but there is also a necessity to practice it in everyday life to become skillful at managing attention before a severely stressful event occurs. In mindfulness meditation, you begin to track where your mind takes off to when it leaves your target task and then you ardently bring it back to that task more quickly. You are less willing to let your mind dwell in negative emotions that dull it. Once you mindfully observe how much time is wasted on cognitive distractions and how that leaves you vulnerable to missing what is really going on around you now, you begin to work toward the vividness of a better focused mind and wisdom. A mindful investigator brings extra skills into the investigation by keeping track of their internal processes as they investigate and what the victims were likely attending to as events unfolded.

Organizational actions themselves may incorporate meditative properties of mindfulness and concentration. For example, the five mindful processes associated with organizing for high reliability (e.g., Weick et al., 1999) can be viewed in terms of their possible effects on calmness (concentration) and strength of insight (mindfulness). Preoccupation with failure involves a search for incipient failures to the exclusion of all else, suggesting that such preoccupation, if intense enough, induces stable concentration and potentially vivid insights. Reluctance to simplify and sensitivity to operations both involve replacing remembered abstractions with current awareness of details, which suggests an increase in vividness but at the possible expense of concentration (e.g., the term *operations* is plural) if we intentionally monitor one object to the exclusion of others. Commitment to resilience is about concentration complemented with mindfulness as the means to achieve insights for future actions.[2]

To bounce back from a disruption involves vivid attention to whatever is at hand in an effort to ascertain how it can be cobbled together to resume whatever was interrupted. But again, those vivid moments are scattered among diverse objects and therefore potentially unstable without both strong concentration and mindfulness. And finally, deference to expertise that is made possible by underspecified structures, involves efforts to stabilize attention by routing decisions to experts who are best able to hold onto the intended object without distraction. What is interesting in these five scenarios of reliability is the suggestion that High Reliability Organizations (HROs) may be better suited to see things clearly than to maintain a stable focus on what they do see.

A more direct application of mindfulness in the HRO example would occur if a mindful person would look at the effect that being "preoccupied with failure" was having on their mind as they tried to hold failure in focus in the present moment. Introspective questions might include "Am I able to concentrate to remove distractions so that I can focus calmly?" and "Do I return quickly to my task when my mind wanders?" A mindful person would look for subtle stresses that preoccupation creates and then look for ways to reduce the stresses so they could more clearly perceive the underlying processes. Ardency demands that mindfulness be mentally proactive in the present moment as mindfulness attends to the failure task at hand. At advanced stages of mindfulness, if the person would merely focus on failures with meditative calmness, the failures present would come into awareness on their own as insights.

Notice that we are beginning to establish connections between Eastern thinking, Western thinking,

and organizational thinking. To further this connecting, we look more closely at two Western definitions of mindfulness and at the ideas of organizing, expertise, and organizational design.

Brown and Ryan (2003), working within a Western tradition, define mindfulness as

> enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality. . . . [A] core characteristic of mindfulness has been described as open or receptive awareness and attention. . . which may be reflected in a more regular or sustained consciousness of ongoing events and experiences. (pp. 822-823)

They attempt to assess mindfulness as a state using the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Sample items include "I find it difficult to stay focused on what is happening in the present," "It seems I am 'running on automatic' without much awareness of what I'm doing," "I rush through activities without being really attentive to them," and "I find myself doing things without paying attention."

Regardless of one's reaction to the item content, the larger point we want to make is that this Western formulation does not preclude actions that are consistent with the development of Eastern, nonconceptual mindfulness. For example, "enhanced attention and awareness" in Brown and Ryan (2003) corresponds to focus in Eastern work; "current experience and present reality" correspond to being attentive to the present rather than to the past and future; "open and receptive" correspond to attending that is calm, quiet, undistracted, and free of self-talk; "ongoing" corresponds to impermanence and the rise and fall of events; and reference to "events and experience" corresponds to attention directed both inward and outward. When we label these similarities as points of correspondence, what we mean is that intentional development of those Western capabilities moves people toward increased skill at conceptual mindfulness. Ironically, such movement also leads to greater realization of the need to engage in meta-examination of those very acts of conceptualizing and greater interest in the question of what happens when one sheds concepts. These acts of meta-examination are an early stage of mindfulness meditation corresponding to Thera's earlier "Factors of Absorption." As the examination becomes more focused, more stable, and more vivid, the person is drawn more fully into introspection of the mind and its workings rather than to its content alone.

Implicit connections between Eastern and Western thinking are also found in Langer (2000). For example, when people make distinctions, they often see some of the limits of a specific category, and occasionally they even see the limits of categorizing itself. Furthermore, efforts to differentiate a crude category tend to focus attention on the here and now, highlight the costs of distraction, reveal that entities are more transient than they appear, and create gradual recognition that changes in events are often not of one's own making. When people engage in distinction making, they begin to realize just "how quickly we put our experiences into tidy and unexamined conceptual boxes" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002, p. 69), how reluctant we are to examine those conceptual boxes, and how much is discovered when we do examine those boxes.

Another way to strengthen the connection between Eastern and Western views of mindfulness is to redirect attention away from organization toward organizing. Such a shift emphasizes that organizing involves ongoing mental action infused with rising and falling, becoming and declining, emerging and disappearing. The shift in language from the concept of organization to the concept of organizing makes room for greater individual awareness by investigators and employees alike of one or more of the three characteristics of existence. When researchers invoke the concept of organizing (e.g., Heath & Sitkin, 2001), they imply that the objects of their study show impermanence (we have to keep reaccomplishing the coordination and interdependence associated with collective action); they accept the inevitability of suffering (reaccomplishment is necessary, because order keeps rising and falling, appearing and disappearing, and forming and dissolving despite our efforts to hold it permanently in place), and/or they discard the view that a (permanent) material self is in control of the efforts to enact order (there is no entity or stable agent that is in control of order, but only flow and constantly changing ways of relating).

An intriguing issue stirred up by the argument that Eastern and Western views are incompatible and cannot be connected involves the comparison that is often implied. If we invoke the fivefold classification of skill acquisition proposed by Dreyfuss and Dreyfuss (1986, 2005)—novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, expertise—then existing discussions of mindfulness often compare novice conceptualizers with expert nonconceptualizers. For example, people who practice conceptual mindfulness are often

described either as people who process information by means of context-free rules (novice), people who process information by means of rules and perceptions that are more attuned to the situation (advanced beginner), or as people (competent) who process information by means of a plan that organizes situational data and allows the person to examine "only the small set of factors that are most important given the chosen plan" (Dreyfuss & Dreyfuss, 1986, p. 24). It is when we move to the stages of proficiency and expertise that conceptual skills and mindful practice begin to shade into one another. In the case of a proficient conceptualizer, what stands out is that deliberation is less detached and rule bound and more reliant on intuition and the know-how to see patterns in situations without decomposing them into component features. And the even more advanced expert conceptualizer is described as a person who acts arationally. If rational action is understood as calculative thought in which component parts are combined to form a whole, then arational action "refers to action without conscious analytic decomposition and recombination" (p. 36). Experts do not solve problems or make decisions, they do what works.

Although expert performance is ongoing and nonreflective, experts can and often do reflect critically on their intuitions, decisions, and things that do not work out. Here is how an expert psychiatric nurse, widely admired for her judgment, describes her work:

> When I say to a doctor, 'the patient is psychotic,' I don't always know how to legitimize the statement. But I am never wrong. Because I know psychosis from inside out. And I feel that, and I know it, and I trust it. (Benner, 1984, p. 32)

This description, which represents expert skill in nursing, portrays that skill as one that may involve both conceptual and nonconceptual mindfulness depending on the source of the knowing. If the knowing is based solely on past experience, then it is conceptual mindfulness. If, however, the knowing is based on present experience of the patient as a directly perceived object, then the knowing is nonconceptual mindfulness. The expert nurse also hints at the possibility that not all concepts are equally fine grained (Tsoukas, 2005) and not all conceptualizing is context relevant. This raises the possibility that there may be better and poorer concepts and that better concepts sweep in more interconnected details so that people know more fully what is happening. It is these variations that may mask the possibility that mindfulness is already present in more mundane features of organizing.

Finally, the preceding arguments suggest that organizations can be designed (Boland & Collopy, 2004) in ways that transcend the constraints of conceptual mindfulness and incorporate Eastern insights. This suggestion can be illustrated by the five processes used by HROs to sustain alertness and become more aware of the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of their own internal functioning (Weick et al., 1999).

The processes used by organizations such as air traffic control systems, nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, and wildland firefighting teams often consist of efforts to enrich discriminations, as would be expected from organizations steeped in Western views of mindfulness. But processes used by HROs also exhibit analogues of meditative properties meaning that, occasionally, these organizations stumble onto insights that are not tied directly to concepts. The pattern of mindfulness found in these HRO settings is one where people pay more attention to failures than success, avoid simplicity rather than cultivate it, are just as sensitive to operations as they are to strategy, organize for resilience rather than anticipation, and allow decisions to migrate to experts wherever they are located (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Weick et al., 1999). Those five processes of mindfulness are clearly conceptual, because they preserve detail, refine distinctions, create new categories, draw attention to context, and guard against misspecification, misestimation, and misunderstanding. But these same five processes also reflect an indirect grasp of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. In addition, a mindfulness meditation practice can add an internal awareness of how these same five processes affect the observer's mind during the times they are in use.

Preoccupation with failure designates continuous attention to details to detect small discrepancies that could be symptoms of larger problems in a system. HROs watch for early warning signals, because they know that they have neither experienced all ways in which a system can fail, nor have they imagined and deduced all possible modes of failure. This preoccupation with continuous change is compatible with Eastern mindfulness in the sense that people see

events that keep changing and internal responses that keep changing. Success and failure are neither permanent nor completely under the control of an unchanging agent.

Reluctance to simplify designates that more effective HROs hesitate to live by generalizations and generic categories. Those categories that are used in HROs tend to be more fine grained and register differences between present situations and past experience more fully. When people simplify with reluctance, they often discover that what they are noticing is different and changing and impermanent and slowing down. Furthermore, the observed differences tend not to be of a person's own making. Reluctance to simplify also tends to induce closer attention to what is happening here and now, hesitation to label whatever is observed until the moment is seen with clarity, and greater wariness of labels and routines inherited from the past. However to simplify, letting everything go is fundamental to mindfulness. It is all that attachment, which is making the mind foggy. This aspect of high-reliability functioning might better be labeled a *reluctance to conceptualize* to align it more precisely with mindfulness.

Sensitivity to operations designates close attention to connections between immediate actions and distal consequences (Cooper & Law, 1995). This sensitivity involves less attention to plans and more attention to emergent outcomes that are set in motion by immediate actions. Sensitivity to operations is an action with meditative properties, because it necessitates being fully present here and now with a focus on immediate experience and not on "theories, attitudes, abstractions, projections, expectations" (Epstein, 1999, p. 835). It is important to note that sensitivity to operations means "sensitivity to interconnected operations." Perception of interconnections makes it clearer that relations and networks determine outcomes and that the nodes (agents) in a network change continuously as a function of changes in connections. To be sensitive to operations is to be sensitive to interconnections and also to the absence of an unchanging organization or self. Because perceiving an interconnection is to freeze the flow of reality to solve an immediate need, one also needs skill in letting that same interconnection go so that the next instance of reality is not frozen as well.

Commitment to resilience refers to processes that recover from setbacks, especially through improvisation. There is a premium on using whatever is at hand both to assemble a means to bounce back from a specific unexpected event and to restore the ability to bounce back a second time. To focus on resilience is to acknowledge that surprises will occur that are not of your own making, that unintended consequences will always occur, that nothing stays the same, and that pleasant experiences are short lived.

The "underspecification of structure" to foster a "deference to expertise" is the process of allowing decisions to migrate to those with the expertise to make them rather than migrate to those higher in a hierarchy. The fact that different people keep making different decisions is an indication that specific decision structures are impermanent as is the expertise identified with specific people or positions. Deference to expertise embodies being mindful that expert decision making can arise spontaneously where it is needed most and is independent of rank, position, or expectations.

CONCLUSION

If all things are preceded by mind and if our current ideas about mind in organizational studies are too narrow, then the versions of conceptual mindfulness that we now use will prove too weak to improve organizational functioning. Narrowness occurs partly because we overlook preconceptual moments, virtue, concentration, and mindfulness as ways to further develop the mind to control attention and actions. Existing warnings that we need transformative organizational change tend to ignore subtle improvements in the qualities of attention and instead encourage reframing the contents of attention. Too much is expected from mindfulness directed solely at content, and too little effort is invested in observing the ways in which the conceptualizing of content is itself the problem. To focus on the nature of conceptualizing mind is to develop awareness of how gross attention functions, but it is also to see that there is more to attention than the fact that it is limited. Distinction making and differentiation remain important, but now their capabilities to mislead are more apparent. The necessity to identify acts with meditative properties in organizations that move underneath these conceptual processes is overdue.

Mindfulness meditation is a direct means to move toward less dependence on conceptualizing.

It adds awareness of the mind itself as a new skill. But there are forms of organizational design, such as practices of high reliability organizing, that currently foster less dependence. By "foster," we mean that these practices have meditative properties, such as intensifying concentration, which are necessary precursors for greater development of Eastern nonconceptual mindfulness. The emphasis is on the word *development*. High-reliability organizing does not replace Eastern mindfulness. Rather, it suggests benchmarks by which the presence of shortcomings in the process of constructing Western knowledge can be detected, altered, and superseded or complemented by greater wisdom.

NOTES

1. This sign now hangs over the desk of the first author.

2. Focusing on failure does not necessarily result in more powerful concentration. It does so only if the focus finally excludes interference from other mental states. There is a difference in clinging to "finding failures" and looking for them during a meditative calm of one-pointed concentration, free from hindrances.

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