

Mindfulness and Nature

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Interconnectedness has become an established term in the meditation literature. It implies that any given phenomenon is connected to all other phenomena. Perhaps the best way of appreciating how the principle of interconnectedness relates to our lives as human beings is through our connection with nature. When we breathe in, we breathe in the out-breath of plants, shrubs and trees. When we breathe out, we breathe out the in-breath of flowers, animals and birds. When we drink water, we drink the clouds, rivers and oceans. When we eat a meal, we eat plants, vegetables and fruits that have grown out of the earth.

The notion that we exist interdependently and are connected to nature and all other phenomena is a beautiful idea. However, we would argue that it falls short of capturing the full depth and intimacy of our relationship with nature and the other phenomena that we share the universe with. The reason for this is that while the notion of interconnectedness helps to depict the symbiotic relationship that exists between humans and nature, it implies that one discrete and separately existing entity (e.g., a human being) is connected to another discrete and separately existing entity (e.g., nature). In other words, implicit within the meaning of the term interconnectedness, is the assumption that while closely interrelated, phenomena are also separate from one another.

From a relative standpoint, it is both possible and necessary to distinguish humans from nature and one phenomenon from another. However, because it is not possible to identify the “self” of a given phenomenon, there cannot truly exist a separation between one thing and another thing. This is because as soon as we attempt to identify the origins or self of something, we inevitably have to direct our search outwards to acknowledge the presence of other phenomena. In other words, whilst searching for the self of something, we find everything else that exists except the inherently existing self that was the original target of

our investigation. An effective search for self will always yield the truth that in one thing exists all things yet in no thing does there intrinsically exist anything.

We inter-exist with nature (and all other phenomena) to the extent that it is impossible to assign boundaries. Our minds and bodies are embedded within the natural world such that when we breath in, nature breathes in with us, and when we breath out, nature also breathes out. We are of the nature of nature; it exists in us and we exist in it. In this paper, we explore our connection with nature and focus on how nature can be used to enhance mindfulness practice, foster wellbeing, and cultivate insight into the self, reality and the present moment more generally.

Our Connection with Nature

There is a growing body of research demonstrating that simple exposure to nature is good for our health and wellbeing. An emerging body of research also demonstrates that there are health benefits associated with feeling more connected to nature. Nature connectedness is an accepted psychological construct that describes a realization of our shared place within nature. Nature connectedness also incorporates our emotional response, beliefs, attitudes and behavior towards nature. In addition to helping us feel good and function well, a connection with nature is associated with greater life satisfaction, lower anxiety, improved vitality, meaningfulness, happiness, creativity, pro-social behaviors and pro-nature behaviors. Research has also shown that mindfulness mediates the relationship between nature connectedness and wellbeing.

People with a strong connection to nature are more likely to spend time in nature, and thus experience the wider benefits of exposure to nature. Various hypotheses have been tendered, both in the research and traditional meditation literature, as to why spending time in

nature is conducive to physical, psychological and spiritual wellbeing. For example, it has been argued that our soft-fascination of nature helps people to knowingly or unknowingly become attentive to their environment when in nature, which facilitates calm, rest and contemplation. This seems sensible as our senses evolved to make sense of the natural world. Although this theory provides a good understanding of the restorative benefits of nature, it tends to focus on short-term benefits and is based on the proposition that nature primarily provides restoration when fatigued. A more recent explanation of the benefits of nature shows how nature brings balance to our emotion regulation system as well as the nervous system's control over bodily functions and organs, including the heart. This suggests that nature can contribute to fostering two different dimensions of happiness, both joy and calm. Some of the support for this hypothesis comes from studies showing that simply touching wood or viewing an image of roses for just three minutes can induce beneficial physiological responses to nature. In line with the supportive evidence and assumptions of this model, and given the traditional meditation literature makes reference to the fact that the human body comprises the elements of water, wind, earth, and fire (i.e., heat), it is perhaps conceivable that being closer to these elements by spending time in nature somehow helps to restore balance to both the body and mind.

Established Western models of health tend to view people as separate from their environment, with health being a function of the individual. However, some scientists have argued that our body, senses and emotions are continually interacting with the natural environment via two-way chemical and electromagnetic interactions. This implies that as nature changes, our relationship with nature changes and that a rigid concept of self hinders our ability to communicate with, and derive benefit from, nature. The biomedical model of medicine is based on a deviation from "normal" within the individual. The biopsychosocial model is arguably more encompassing due to advocating a mind-body interconnectedness

where psychological, biological and social factors play a significant role in wellbeing.

However, perhaps there is scope for a “mind-body-nature” or “biopsychophysiology” model of wellbeing, that acknowledges the role of biological, psychological and natural environment factors.

Mindfulness in Nature

There is something calming, but also energizing about spending time in nature. This appears to be an experience common to the majority of human beings, irrespective of their cultural background and of whether or not they are walking the path of meditation. However, it's our experience that meditative awareness can be used to enhance the restorative and balancing qualities of nature, and that spending time in nature can in turn enhance meditative awareness. This appears to be consistent with the view of numerous spiritual adepts who choose to retreat to nature to develop and sharpen their contemplative skills. For example, in his *Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, the 8th century Indian Buddhist saint Shantideva said “When shall I dwell in unclaimed and naturally spacious regions, wandering as I please and without a residence” and “Until one is hoisted by four men and mourned by the world, one should retire to the forest”.

There are many ways that nature can be used to enhance mindful awareness. Some of these methods involve allowing certain qualities of nature to guide the content and direction of meditation in a natural way. For example, whilst sitting in meditation on a mountainside or in another natural space with a panoramic view, we can open our eyes and without gazing at any one object in particular, try to both embrace and relax into the entire panorama. This meditative technique can help to cultivate an expansive mental view that is conducive to settled meditation and to gaining insight into the open and limitless nature of the mind.

Another method involves enhancing meditative awareness by observing and contemplating specific properties of the natural environment. For example, whilst walking mindfully next to, or sitting in meditation near, a river, one can observe the river and contemplate questions such as (i) if I look away from the river for 30 seconds and then return to observing it, is it the same river? (ii) since at any moment the river is always flowing, how can it be said to be the same? and (iii) since the river I am looking at has the same name and occupies the same position on the land, how can it be said to be different? Questions such as these can help us gain understanding into impermanence and interconnectedness, as well as the non-self or empty nature of phenomena.

Another example is to observe a tree and contemplate questions such as (i) what are the causes and conditions that have led to the manifestation of this tree? (ii) since the tree and I share the same air, water and nutrients, how can it be said that I am separate from the tree? and (iii) since the tree is a tree and I am a human being, how can it be said that I am the same as the tree? Questions such as these can help us to gain understanding into interconnectedness as well as the limitations of this notion.

In addition to using nature to enhance mindful awareness, there also exist methods that involve using mindfulness to enhance the restorative qualities of nature. These techniques involve applying mindfulness to the pathways to nature connectedness, which include contact through the senses, beauty, emotion, meaning and compassion. An example, that perhaps we could refer to as “mindfulness-enhanced nature connectedness”, would be practicing sitting in a quiet forest and relaxing in order to allow our senses to be bathed by the sounds, smells and energy of the forest. For instance, we can allow the sound of wind blowing through the trees, branches gently swaying, and birds singing to gently massage the mind. This activity, known as “forest bathing”, has been shown to foster calm and help

rebalance our emotions. However, by using mindfulness to become more aware of both the forest and what is happening inside the mind, it should be easier to enter deeper into the heart of the forest and be soothed by its presence.

Becoming aware of how the beauty of nature affects our emotions can activate a further pathway to nature connectedness as our emotional bond with, and love for nature deepens. Contemporary mindfulness scholarship sometimes conceptualizes mindfulness as a non-evaluative process that would be a barrier to finding meaning through a deeper connection with nature. However, rather than dispassionate observation, authentic mindfulness requires active awareness. Active mindful awareness can foster a deeper capacity for meaning making, which in a natural setting can relate to discovering the signs, beauty and symbols of nature. Finally, realizing the depth of our connectedness to nature and extending the self concept to include nature, can strengthen our moral and ethical concern for nature – fostering nature connectedness through compassion.

Nature in Mindfulness

In addition to using meditative awareness to enrich our time in nature, we can also use nature to enrich meditative awareness without physically venturing into nature. More specifically, here we are referring to the use of visualization of nature to enhance meditation. Using a visualization of nature in meditation requires us to feel that we have an intimate relationship with nature. Indeed, the more we can associate with a chosen visualization of nature, the more we can cultivate and embody some of the qualities of the natural environment.

An example of using a visualization of nature in this manner is to sit in meditation and mentally construct an image of a mountain. Visualizing the mountain should ideally follow a phase of focusing awareness on the natural flow of the in and out breath in order to calm and

steady the mind. At first, we can visualize the mountain in the mind space immediately in front of us and we can relate to the mountain as something that is separate from us. As we breathe in and out, we continue to add detail to the visualization such that by the time we have finished constructing it, we can see that the mountain extends high into the sky, is adjoined by forests and lakes, is adorned with streams and rivers that flow down its sides, and is surrounded by several white clouds that float over its summit. When visualizing the mountain, we should try to retain about 40% of our awareness on the natural flow of our breathing, and use the remainder of our awareness to keep the image of the mountain as focused, clear and stable as possible.

When we observe the visualized mountain, we should see that the view from its summit is unimpeded. The mountain is confident and stable but due to being deeply rooted in the earth, it is also relaxed. The mountain has a definite presence, but it doesn't need to try hard to maintain that presence. The mountain is comfortable with itself and it doesn't need to impress anybody. Apart from being a mountain, there is nothing else the mountain needs to do, and there is nowhere or nobody else it needs to be. Whilst observing the mountain, we should also see that it is unfazed by the changing weather it encounters. Storms, rain and strong winds beat upon the mountain's side, but it remains centered and calm. As the turbulent weather gives way to clear skies and sunshine, the mountain bathes in the heat of the sun. However, it is not attached to agreeable weather and understands that like all things, weather fronts and seasons come and go.

After we observe and contemplate how the mountain comports itself in its natural environment, instead of visualizing the mountain as something separate from us, we can begin to see ourselves as the mountain. As we breathe in, we should experience that the mountain slightly expands, and as we breathe out, we should experience that the mountain

slightly contracts. If we encounter turbulent winds of thoughts and feelings when visualizing ourselves as a mountain, we should remember that we are deeply rooted in the earth and should try to remain calm, centered and stable. We can also use the mountain's altitude to survey and rise above the landscape of the mind. From this elevated position, we can observe the processes that are unfolding in the mind but we can remain unattached to those processes and understand that our mental landscape is changing on a moment-by-moment basis.

Visualizing ourselves as a mountain can be a helpful meditation technique but there are many other features or processes of nature that can be adopted as objects of visualization. Other good examples include (i) the sky or space that are without boundaries, (ii) a cloud that is free in the sky but that becomes dark and ominous if it attaches to particles of water, (iii) a flower that is vibrant and fresh, (iv) a wave that realizes although it is a wave that lives for a short time, it is also inseparable from, and of the nature of, the ocean, (v) a lake of calm still water that reflects the sky above it, and (vi) a star that observes the earth and how people are born, become engrossed in various plans and endeavors, but then quickly become old and die.

The Nature of Mindfulness

Although this paper has referred to the connection between humans and nature, we would like to reiterate that it is difficult to draw a separation between these two phenomena because humans are *of* nature. Furthermore, it is difficult to define one location as natural and another as "man-made" because humans, and all of the construction materials they work with, ultimately derive from nature. Similarly, human beings influence even the most remote natural environments on this earth, often with detrimental consequences,

The nature of mindfulness is such that it stimulates the meditation practitioner to not only be aware of happenings in the body, mind and environment, but to investigate and

extract wisdom from the natural and man-made features that they encounter. When we investigate the world in this manner, we should start to see that from a certain perspective, nature also practices mindfulness, and that we might be able to learn from nature accordingly. For example, many human beings appear to have difficulty in accepting and working with some of the natural laws of existence. One such natural law is impermanence, which means that as a rule, everything will one day cease to exist and that as part of moving towards death, phenomena are in a constant state of change. Nature seems to understand and accept this truth and as such, it finds stability in constant change and doesn't hold onto things. For instance, a wave rises out of the ocean, it grows bigger and experiences what it is like to be a wave, and then it dissolves back into the ocean. The wave is simply a wave and it is happy about this. It enjoys its short life on this earth and it doesn't try to live forever or think that it exists separately from other waves and from the ocean. The wave doesn't become attached to things such as money, career, reputation and possessions. The wave knows that due to impermanence, becoming attached in this manner would be futile and would only lead to suffering. If we look deeply, there is wisdom in how the wave lives its life and the wave can help us to become better mindfulness practitioners by accepting and living in harmony with the laws of nature.

Since the time the first humans lived on this planet, people have employed their creative capacity within the natural environment to foster meaningful understanding, satisfaction with life, and a utilitarian relationship that maximizes the chances of survival. In fact, whether they know it or not and like it or not, human beings are creators. In this present moment, humans are creating and shaping the physical and social environment that they will occupy in the future. With our thoughts, feelings and perceptions, we are also each creating the psychological environment that we will have to live in, or live with, in the future. Creation can only happen in the present moment and to be good at creating, we must have a

good awareness of the raw material we are working with. On this basis, we would argue that mindfulness, the art of consciously working with the raw material of the present moment, is a natural process. When we prevent this natural process from occurring due to not being mindful of what we are thinking, saying and doing, it causes both nature and our inner psychological environment to become unbalanced. There are different types of symbiotic relationship, but the cultivation of mindfulness and nature connectedness can help to ensure that the symbiotic relationship we create with nature is one that is mutually beneficial, rather than mutually destructive.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.