

DEVELOPING A MINDFUL MORAL COMPASS:

EMBODYING ETHICS FOR MINDFULNESS TRAINED PRACTITIONERS

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16 GUIDELINES FOR LIFE

A secular ethical system that emphasizes contemplative practices that cultivate compassion and wisdom

ABSTRACT

Psychotherapists, and other change agents, embody ethics through the adoption of theoretical frameworks, professional practices and personal values. There is a growing need for ethics training to be included in mindfulness certificate programs, as has been recognized and embraced by the University of Toronto's Applied Mindfulness Meditation Certificate Program. Training in mindfulness-

based interventions for professionals should make explicit the motivation, intention, values, and practices that are sometimes assumed aspects of mindfulness. The 16 *Guidelines for Life* (Murdoch & Oldershaw, 2009) provides a secular system that emphasizes contemplative practices that cultivate compassion and wisdom. Through examination of this system and in combination with the latest research on neuroscience, mindfulness practitioners can build mindful moral compasses that will guide their application of mindfulness in psychotherapy and beyond.

Keywords: Mindfulness, ethics, morality, education, professionals, contemplative



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ENTWICKLUNG EINES ACHTSAMEN MORALKOMPASS: ETHIK FÜR THERAPEUTEN MIT ACHTSAMKEITSAUSBILDUNG

Kurzfassung: Psychotherapeuten und andere „Change Agents“ verkörpern Ethik durch die Annahme von theoretischen Rahmenbedingungen, professionellen Praktiken und persönlichen Werten. Es herrscht erhöhter Bedarf an der Einbeziehung von Ethiktraining in Achtsamkeits-Zertifikats-Programmen, so wie es im Applied Mindfulness Meditation Certificate Program der Universität von Toronto erkannt und umgesetzt wurde. Die Ausbildung für achtsamkeitsbasierte Interventionen für Fachleute sollte die Motivation, Absicht, Werte und Praktiken explizit machen, die manchmal als Aspekte der Achtsamkeit gelten. Die 16 *Guidelines for Life* (Murdoch & Oldershaw, 2009) stellt ein säkulares System zur Verfügung, das kontemplative Praktiken betont, die Barmherzigkeit und Weisheit kultivieren. Durch

die Überprüfung dieses Systems und in Verbindung mit der neuesten Forschung im Bereich der Neurowissenschaften können Therapeuten achtsame Moral-kompassen erstellen, welche die Achtsamkeitsanwendung in der Psychotherapie und darüber hinaus leiten können.

Schlüsselwörter: Achtsamkeit, Ethik, Moral, Erziehung, Fachleute, kontemplativ

LE DÉVELOPPEMENT D'UN COMPAS MORAL POUR LA PLEINE CONSCIENCE: UNE ÉTHIQUE POUR LES PRATICIENS FORMÉS À LA PLEINE CONSCIENCE

Résumé: Les psychothérapeutes, et autres agents de transformation, représentent les éthiques en adoptant des cadres théoriques, des pratiques professionnelles et des valeurs personnelles. Il y a un besoin grandissant pour une formation à l'éthique à inclure dans les programmes de certification à la pleine conscience, comme l'a été reconnu et accueilli par l'Université de Toronto dans leur Programme de certification en Pleine conscience appliquée. La formation aux interventions basées sur la pleine conscience pour des professionnels devrait rendre explicite la motivation, l'intention, les valeurs, et les pratiques qui sont parfois des aspects présumés de la pleine conscience. Les 16 Lignes directrices pour la Vie (16 *Guidelines for Life*, Murdoch & Oldershaw,

2009) fournit un système séculier qui met l'emphasis sur les pratiques contemplatives qui cultivent la compassion et la sagesse. En examinant ce système, combiné aux dernières recherches en neuroscience, les praticiens de la pleine conscience peuvent construire des compas moraux de la pleine conscience pour guider leur application de la pleine conscience en psychothérapie, et au-delà.

Mots clés: Pleine conscience, éthique, moralité, éducation, professionnels, contemplative

СОЗДАНИЕ ОСОЗНАННОГО МОРАЛЬНОГО КОМПАСА: ЭТИКА ПРОФЕССИОНАЛОВ, ПРАКТИКУЮЩИХ ОСОЗНАННОСТЬ

Резюме: Этика психотерапевтов и других 'проводников перемен' формируется на основе их личностных ценностей, усвоения теоретического материала и профессиональной практики. Существует возрастающая необходимость включения тренинга по этике в сертификационные программы по Осознанности. Данный факт был признан и принят во внимание Сертификационной программой по Прикладной Медитации Осознанности университета Торонто. Тренинг для профессионалов, основанный на интервенциях из практики Осознанности, призван формировать

ясную мотивацию, намерение и ценности. 16 рекомендаций для жизни (Murdoch & Oldershaw, 2009) представляют собой светскую систему обучения, в которой делается акцент на медитативные практики, развивающие сострадание и мудрость. Изучая эту систему в комбинации с последними исследованиями нейронаук, профессионалы, практикующие Осознанность, могут создать осознанный моральный Компас, указывающий направление для использования идей Осознанности в психотерапии и за ее пределами.

Ключевые слова: осознанность, этика, мораль, обучение, профессионалы, медитативный

The field of mindfulness is expanding rapidly: as institutions train employees; universities certify practitioners and therapists; and research in the field increases. Notions of mindfulness range from religious application to therapeutic techniques. While the impacts of mindfulness are becoming evident, questions around motivations and intentions behind mindfulness are increasingly pressing. Specifically, there is a need for ethics training to be included in mindfulness certification programs, as has been recognized and embraced by

the University of Toronto's Applied Mindfulness Meditation Certificate Program (AMM-MIND), housed in the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. If directly addressed, training in mindfulness-based interventions can make explicit the motivation, intention, values, and practices that are often assumed or implicit in

"When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time. **Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on – not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you.**"

Thich Nhat Hanh (2003)

"Ethics is not simply a matter of knowing. More importantly, it is about doing."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2011, p.103)

mindfulness. This possibility has led to changes in the AMM-MIND program that presents participants with the tools to build mindful moral compasses for their personal and professional practices.

The ‘16 Guidelines for Life’ is a secular ethical system that emphasizes contemplative practices that cultivate compassion and wisdom (Murdoch & Oldershaw, 2009). Secular ethics can include both religious and non-religious beliefs and values (Gyatso, 2011). Making mindful ethics ‘explicit’ does not have to be a process of imposing a code or ethical agreement (though many have gone this route). Rather, strengthening embodied ethical practice can be achieved experientially by raising ethical questions, providing conceptual framework to understand the ethics within mindfulness and practicing transformative experiences that link values and practices to their moral expression. When ethics is brought to the fore in mindfulness trainings, the full range of what mindfulness can offer begins to become apparent (Monteiro *et al.*, 2010).

DEFINITION OF MINDFULNESS

Taken together, the two opening quotes might read: ‘Mindfulness is not simply a matter of knowing, it is a matter of paying attention to the fullness of one’s experience that leads one to act moral-

ly’. Mindfulness provides tools to become aware, present, intentional, and non-judgmental – such that one may uncover human nature and act accordingly. “*Understanding interconnectedness is not a spiritual luxury; it’s a societal imperative*” (Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 59). Mindfulness creates the opportunity for the brain & body to have a controlled response (Luder *et al.*, 2009) through self-regulation (van den Kurk *et al.*, 2010) and awareness of bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions in order to suppress and alter reactionary responses (Holzel *et al.*, 2007). In the AMM-MIND program, it has been referred to as the “quarter second pause” that allows for thought before reaction. Clearly, when training a range of professionals, it is important to establish the mechanisms, history, and techniques of mindfulness. An essential addition to this is training is to build the capacity to understand how mindfulness leads to paying attention to “societal imperatives” that arise through practice and then establish one’s stance and from which to act.

OVERVIEW OF AMM-MIND PROGRAM

The inter-professional Applied Mindfulness Meditation program (AMM-MIND), hosted by the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, began over 10 years ago, with three basic workshops that taught the practice

and the evidence-based science of mindfulness. These courses compose three of the five A-Level core courses today: Histories of Mindfulness Practices; Mindfulness Meditation and its Applications; and Psychology, East and West. As the neurobiological effects of mindfulness began to come to light, a fourth course was added to the core curriculum: Neuroscience, Mindfulness and Mindfulness Meditation. In addition to A-Level courses, now there are over 65 workshops in Levels B and C, taught by 45 faculty members, with more than 800 learners, who have participated in the program.

The program teaches the foundations of mindfulness practice and its applications in psychotherapy, health, wellness, mental health, education, the arts, the corporate world, leadership and governance. The program’s goal is to integrate what is often viewed as the separate domains of mind, body, relationships, and society as a whole. After the A-Level core courses are taken, learners can take courses in diverse methods for intervention or prevention such as: Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy; Learn to Breathe; Mindfulness Without Borders; Mindful Leadership and Governance; Conscious Care and Support; Mindful Contemplative End of Life Care; Transformative Mindfulness Meditation, as well as numerous other mind-



fulness-based interventions. This is supported by an active relationship with the Centre for Mindfulness Studies (Toronto) to build a community of practice.

After five years of teaching mindfulness, the co-directors noticed that some people claimed they had a mindfulness practice, but they did not manifest the behaviours that had come to be associated with a regular consistent meditative practice. Although consistent practice has numerous positive effects (see neurological discussion later), the question of how much practice, and how often, is still up for debate. In the interim, an emphasis on becoming aware of one's intentions, values, and actions through mindfulness still needed to be addressed. Namely, AMM-MIND identified the need for an experiential course that addressed the fact that mindfulness is a process that yields wisdom (of the nature of mind and world) and can result in greater intention towards ourselves, and others, which is often presented as self-compassion and compassion (Davidson & Harrington, 2001).

A fifth core course, Secular Ethics Through Mindfulness (now Ethics Through Mindfulness), was introduced to specifically explore the ethical questions behind the intention and motivation of

practitioners, who apply mindfulness in therapeutic, educational, corporate, and personal settings. Thus, the ethics course (code: MINDA-5, SCS 3133) directs attention to the possible outcomes sought through mindfulness practices that may contribute to happiness, liberation from suffering and ultimately asks, "What would it take to create a civil society based on mindful qualities?" (Klein *et al.*, 2015).

ETHICS AND MINDFULNESS

In the Western context, ethics typically falls into a few categories such as: consequentialism (which determines right and wrong by the outcome of actions); deontological ethics (which focuses on duty to determine right, wrong, and intention); and virtue ethics (which answers ethical questions as a matter of good character and habit); all of which seek to answer the question of how to live a "good life". Mindful ethics seeks to uncover the nature of our world and minds through the use of attention, focus, visualization, contemplation, and then act accordingly with the right motivation (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). The Dalai Lama (2011) argues that because we are social beings that rely on each other to thrive, empathy and compassion are innate qualities, which can also be developed over a life-time and are not dependent on religious beliefs or practices. As

referenced later in this article, neuroscience affirms the importance of empathy and compassion as our "social imperatives," connecting us with each other (Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Siegel, 2012, 2013).

Murdoch & Oldershaw (2009) offer "16 Guidelines For Life" based around four insights, or "wisdom themes," about the nature of Thinking, Acting, Relating and Finding Meaning. Each of the four wisdom themes has four corresponding guidelines that make up a total of sixteen virtues that can help to mindfully cultivate compassion. The 16 *Guidelines For Life* is a secular, modern re-iteration of the 7th century 'code of conduct', compiled by King Songsten Gampo of Tibet, which "*began the process of transforming a war-like nation into one noted for its peace and serenity*" (Murdoch & Oldershaw, 2009, p. 2). These guidelines are part of what makes up the full training in becoming a wise and compassionate human being (according to Tibetan Buddhist understanding), incorporating good conduct (ethics), good heart (compassion) and good mind (wisdom or understanding the nature of the mind and how it perceives and experiences). This system has been adopted by the AMM-MIND program, in order to teach embodiment of mindful ethics.

THE PROCESS OF BUILDING A MINDFUL MORAL COMPASS

The 16 *Guidelines for Life* is a model that presents mindful wisdom, virtues, and practices in order to build an ethical, mindful society. Through a series of self-reflective activities, experiential visualizations, writing, and discussion, the MINDA-5 course uncovers motivation, intention, values/virtues, practices and supports for individuals to practice mindfulness ethically. The 16 *Guidelines for Life* are taught as a descriptive rather than prescriptive system; it is up to participants to decide how they define each guideline and experience each wisdom theme. Furthermore, when the ethical implications of each theme are considered, participants begin to construct their mindful moral compasses.

THE FOUR WISDOM THEMES AND THEIR CORRESPONDING GUIDELINES

The theme of the First Wisdom of the 16 *Guidelines for Life* examines how we 'Think', providing the insight that our world is shaped by thoughts or mind projections and, as such, we must ethically consider how we are responsible for shaping our world. There are four qualities or virtues that help to deepen the wisdom of this insight and can lead to happiness while deepening compassion: Humility, Patience, Contentment and Delight.

The theme of the Second Wisdom looks at how we 'Act': every action has an impact, both immediate and far-reaching, and thus skilful action can lead to a better world. This is practiced and demonstrated through Kindness, Honesty, Generosity, and Right Speech (or Thoughtful Speech).

The Third Wisdom theme explores how we 'Relate': we are all interdependent and if we cherish others, we cherish ourselves. Practicing the four qualities of Respect, Forgiveness, Gratitude, and Loyalty helps nurture relationships. One can consider the ethical implications of this wisdom theme as well as examine the impact of introducing these four qualities into relationships.

The fourth aspect of Wisdom (that can inform ethics) considers how we create or 'Find Meaning' throughout our life, recognizing that if everything is constantly changing, then creating purpose and meaning is always possible, and that it is up to us to do so. Paying attention to one's 'Aspiration' alongside one's 'Principles' and intentionally practicing 'Service' and 'Courage' can create meaning in one's life. These four guidelines can also heighten a sense of 'agency' around one's life purpose.

One of the primary teaching tools used in this course is to reflect cognitively and to use the feelings in the body as a mechanism to observe the ethical nature of one of their virtues in any situation: for example, "Go to an experience of Patience. What effect did it have on your situation? How did it change you? What did it feel like in the body?" And finally, "Based on observing this experience, what is the wisdom of Patience?" By observing a memory of a direct (embodied) experience, participants can take note of the deep understanding that they have of their values and beliefs (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). They begin to use their body as a tool to observe their emotions and feelings that guide their morality (e.g. see Transformative Mindfulness: Oldershaw, 2015). When these virtues are considered in light of a 'Wisdom Theme', they can lead to a balanced ethical practice.

MOTIVATION AND INTENTION

The MINDA-5 course starts by asking participants, "What has drawn you to mindfulness and an applied mindfulness

program? Who are you studying and practicing for? What changes to your life and your world do you hope to achieve through your mindfulness studies?" Answers range from personal motivations that relate to family and day-to-day life, to bringing mindfulness into the workplace, or broad intentions for social justice and equality. Having participants reflect and share these perspectives in the class helps to heighten, and broaden, the collective purpose of a moral mindful practice. These questions start to identify, or affirm, their moral compasses.

VALUES

Participants are asked: "What values do you hold and where did they come from?" "What mindfulness practices help to ground your values and your morality?" In fact, connecting with values and identifying where they come from inherently strengthens the neural circuitry around them. The practice of uncovering and affirming values, in itself, is a key positive habit that is essential to an ethical approach to mindfulness (Monteiro & Musten, 2013, p. 49). It helps us to live closer to our intentions to build a better world (e.g., see: The Five Remembrances, Thich Nhat Hanh, 2015; Monteiro, Nuttall & Musten, 2010). Often participants identify their values within the 16 Guidelines for Life framework. These values become impor-

tant supplements to their professional and personal codes of ethics, especially when individuals connect with how they support decision-making and inform actions.

PRACTICE AND SUPPORT

The final task put to participants is to identify the practices that will continue to ground ethically their mindfulness: "Who supports your mindful ethics and how do you support others?" Some participants simply aspire to practice mindfulness more consistently, while others identify specific strengths, virtues or aspects of character towards which they hope to cultivate more awareness and intention. Many participants identify a weekly or daily practice with the 16 Guidelines for Life as a crucial next step to bring intention to the moral aspects of their mindfulness practices. Finally, participants identify supports in their lives, both literal and figurative, to help them to continue to cultivate mindful ethics.

ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN MINDFULNESS

Given the breadth of the mindfulness field, participants in MINDA-5 spend some time examining and debating questions such as: "Is mindfulness a religion?"; "How do I introduce mindfulness to a challenging workplace?"; "How do I maintain integrity as a certified instructor?"; and "How could



I make mindfulness accessible to marginalized populations?" Also addressed is the topic of the potential pitfalls of the marketing or commercialization of mindfulness. These discussions are often just a starting place for further consideration. Participants have often been grateful for the opportunity to share these questions in a critical dialogue with their colleagues because this prepares them for addressing these potentially controversial topics in their own applications of mindfulness.

THE NEURO-ETHICS OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness impacts neurology; mindful practices increase empathy, compassion and morality via brain changes, as well as changes that increase neurotransmission around emotional awareness and decision-making (Hölzel et al., 2011). Siegel (2012) notes that there are no single brains: we are 'hard-wired' to connect socially. Social relatedness is structured within neural networks of: bonding and attachment, play, curiosity, acceptance, predicting others' behaviours, and sensing what others feel. These are all skills that develop throughout a lifetime (Siegel, 2013). Understanding the neurology of mindfulness, and these impacts on morality via changes in the brain and nervous system, are essential aspects to educating applied-mindfulness practitioners.

Social relatedness can be understood from the study of mirror neurons (Iaconi, 2009), which are proposed to be the roots of a system of empathy that allows individuals to 'map' the minds of others. This forms the basis of what Daniel Siegel (2010) calls "mind-sight maps":

The brain makes what I call a 'me-map' that gives us insight into ourselves, and a 'you-map' for insight into others. We also seem to create 'we-maps,' representations of our relationships. Without such maps, we are unable to perceive the mind within ourselves or others. (p. 8)

These mind-sight maps allow one to resonate with the emotional states of others, based upon their behavioural intentions and observable emotions. When one senses one's own internal states, the pathways for resonating with others become open as well. The application of this principle is profound and it helps mindfulness practitioners to understand the inherently social nature of the human brain.

Paying attention to bodily states, as a mindfulness practitioner, is a crucial step in understanding the nature of interpersonal attunement that is at the heart of interpersonal integration (Siegel, 2010). Attuning to one's motivation, and asking to be shown one's in-

tention behind any actions, including the active cultivation of mindfulness and its applications, one can actually strengthen and awaken this motivation and intention. In so doing, one deepens moral agency.

Mindfulness puts individuals in touch with intuition and morality (Siegel, 2010). Modern research on moral awareness, through functional magnetic resonance imaging scanners, indicates that the pre-frontal cortex (PFC) region of the brain is activated when one thinks about the social good. When there is damage to this PFC region of the brain, individuals may struggle with thinking about the social good. The PFC uses intuition to be aware of bodily sensations and develop a 'gut response' about what is the right decision or choice (Marks-Tarlow, 2014; Siegel, 2010). Again, raising this for mindfulness practitioners increases agency around, and intention, towards the rich ethical implications of the integration of mind, body, and relationships.

Cozolino and Santo (2014) stated that behavioural "*changes are expressions of neuroplasticity, or the ability of the brain to change in response to experience*" (pp. 167-188). In other words, the experience of practicing mindfulness is an act of circuitry building. The secret to deliberate circuit building is having the intention

to pay attention on purpose (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Within the context of AMM-MIND, deliberately paying attention to the ethical implications of mindfulness has the potential to strengthen moral neuro-circuitry. We are hard-wiring ourselves to be more ethical mindfulness practitioners.

IMPACT

Participants find MINDA-5 challenging and transformative. As with any good ethics course, participants leave with many more questions to ponder, but also with more connections to others in their community of practice, as well as new ideas and tools by which to deepen their understanding of mindfulness practices.

We have refined this course over the past two years, having found that participants are far more willing to dive into ethical questions with more structure and clarity around Western ethical concepts at the outset. We have also developed a one-page handout that participants return to after every section of the course to note their personal insights and build their mindful moral compasses (see Appendix). This handout allows participants to record their Motivation, Intention, Values/Virtues, Practices and Supports for ethical mindfulness, alongside reflections on the four wisdom themes of the 16 *Guidelines for Life*.

The instructor's stance is incredibly important, combining therapeutic group work with an experiential learning model. One phrase that is often used in the AMM-MIND program is to „connect rather than correct“. In such a course (and program) that requires participants to be vulnerable and self-reflective, holding a gentle, receptive but discerning guiding stance has proven to be essential for instructors.

Although feedback has been positive, affirming the intention of course to raise ethical questions about mindfulness, a comprehensive impact analysis on effects outside of the class on learners' actual mindful moral practice is still needed. Further study that uncovers the impact of ethics training through mindfulness will be an essential contribution to the field of contemplative studies and psychotherapy.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The AMM-MIND program endeavours to honour traditional contemplative practices while integrating current contemplative practices, human history, literature, and evidence-based therapeutic practices. The 16 *Guidelines for Life* have been introduced as a model for an intentional exploration of the ethics of mindfulness. With this framework in mind, psychotherapists can heighten their mindful moral practices.

Many other mindfulness training and regulating organizations have codes of ethics (e.g. see: UK, Network for Mindfulness-Based Teacher Training Organizations, 2015; Kabat-Zinn *et al.*, 2015). These are essential contributions to the field of applied mindfulness practices and represent one useful approach to make explicit moral practices. Paramount is the consideration of ethics that are drawn from personal experience and self-application of contemplative practices. Incorporating training focused on building an embodied ethical framework is an essential component to teach to those who are learning to apply the vast range of mindfulness-based interventions into psychotherapy. Bringing deep intention to mindfulness practice in combination with discernment towards that which arises from practice can certainly result in a more compassionate and wise world. ■

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ENDNOTES

- Inquiries about the Applied Mindfulness Meditation Certificate Program at the University of Toronto visit: <http://socialwork.utoronto.ca/conted/programs-and-workshops/certificates/mind/>
- Inquiries about the 16 Guidelines for Life, including the origins and translations visit: www.16guidelines.org, or <http://www.compassionandwisdom.org/>

APPENDIX – MINDFUL MORAL COMPASS

Building a Mindful Moral Compass	Wisdom Theme – how does this wisdom theme inform your ethics?
Intention	Think
Motivation	
Inner Values	Act
Practices	Relate
Supports	Create Meaning

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