

## De-Mystifying Mindfulness, part Martial Mindfulness

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In the previous sessions of this module, we've explored some of the large architectural questions about the possible impact of mindfulness on society as a whole. In this session, we're going to focus a little more closely on one of the most controversial areas with which mindfulness is often associated, the conduct of violence and the deployment of mindfulness in the military. In recent years, there's been considerable growth of interest in mindfulness for soldiers, with many national militaries adopting training programs of various kinds. So today we'll look at some of the reasons for this and some of the concerns that we might have about it.

In fact, as we saw in the very first module of this course, quite a few people become interested in mindfulness because of this perceived connection between it and the martial arts. This representation is fueled by all kinds of popular media, where the image of a warrior monk has become so pervasive that it's now a cliché. These images range from representations of the mythic or mystic ninja sitting in meditation in order to cultivate greater martial efficacy to depictions of Jedi knights quieting their minds in order to listen to the living force around them. These romantic ideas of the mindful warrior have considerable appeal in contemporary societies, but not only in contemporary societies. Indeed, as we've already seen, to the extent that modern forms of the martial arts rest upon real historical traditions in Asia and elsewhere, we can find considerable support for the veracity of aspirational figures like the mindful swordsman, especially in, say, the Zen traditions of Japan.

In various ways much of the literature about the connections between the cultivation of mindfulness and the practice of the martial arts rely on more generic connections between mindfulness and the practice of skilled actions more widely. To some extent, the cultivation of mindfulness through the martial arts emerges as a species of what we have called and probably experienced as mindful movement. That is mindfulness in the martial arts like mindfulness in yoga or Qigong or simply mindfulness while stretching or walking or climbing a mountain involves bringing our attention to the particular sensations of the present moment as our bodies work to perform specific actions. A punch, a kick, a lock, or just a throw are just as legitimate as a site of attention and awareness and discipline as a yoga pose or a deliberate step.

Indeed, like some of these other bodily practices, the martial arts involve some of the same basic tensions with the idea of mindfulness. We might entertain two of

them very briefly today. The first is a concern about aspiration and judgement. That is, when we're performing specific techniques that are cultivated for specific purposes, we quite often find ourselves judging our performance in terms of those purposes. So rather than practicing a kick as an opportunity for mindful action, we quite easily and naturally slip into judging the perfection and effectiveness of the kick as a kick. We berate ourselves for our lack of flexibility or strength or precision, and then we resolve to practice harder in order to improve. This pattern of discrepancy-based thinking is exactly the kind of thinking that mindfulness is supposed to help us overcome.

So it's something to which we need to be alert when we're incorporating mindfulness or trying to incorporate mindfulness into skilled actions of various kinds, not only the martial arts.

The second tension revolves around the idea of autopilot. This contemplative discourse of the martial arts is often concerned with how repeated practice of the same techniques leads to a moment of sublimation of those techniques. That is our training is a process of constant repetition designed to liberate us from having to pay attention to our actions at all. The goal is precisely to cultivate a form of autopilot as a form of emancipation from ourselves. When we have to think carefully about our movements and techniques, as we might in a mindful movement exercise for instance, the chances are very low that such techniques will be effective. Indeed, to some extent mastering a martial art means no longer having to pay attention to what your body is doing because it does it all by itself.

So this interpretation of autopilot resembles the kind of thinking that mindfulness is supposed to help us overcome. So it's something else to which we need to be alert when incorporating mindfulness into skilled actions of various kinds, not only into the martial arts.

Between them these two concerns contribute to an explanation for why most practitioners who seek to combine mindfulness and the martial arts tend to prefer the internal or soft martial arts. Like Tai Chi, Tai Chi Chuan, or allied forms like Qigong, rather than more explosive styles like Karate, or Taekwondo. Indeed, in general martial arts that emphasize the cultivation of qi or ki in Japanese seem to lend themselves especially well to mindfulness since it's believed that the flow of qi in our bodies follows the flow of our attention. Hence an exercise like the body scan, for instance, might also be a means to lead qi throughout our entire body.

Of course, all of this overlooks one of the core defining features of the martial arts, which is this, they're not only systems of bodily movements. Their focus is on the disciplined performance of violence and combat. And this basic fact provokes all kinds of ethical questions about the association between mindfulness and the martial arts. In fact, these questions have been longstanding features of the literature and practice of mindfulness for centuries in East Asia in particular. In broad terms, there appear to be two interrelated concerns here. The first is that,

as we've seen, it seems plausible that the practice and cultivation of mindfulness enables the development of higher levels of expertise and skill in martial conduct. And the second is that, as we've seen, the practice of mindfulness is associated with the cultivation of forms of non-judgement and non-attachment that might actually disable our capacity, to make sound choices about when it's important to perform violence.

The overarching ethical question here is whether the cultivation of mindfulness interferes with our ability to appreciate the moral significance of violence. And indeed, whether it is ever appropriate to be non-judgemental about the exercise of violence.

Of course, it shouldn't be surprising to know that various Buddhist traditions have attempted to deal with these in very sophisticated ways. One of these ways is to make the experiential argument that our encounter with mindfulness precisely means the accomplishment of moral wisdom about our actions. Such that any genuinely mindful behavior is always and already ethically upright. That is, the metacognitive space of mindfulness is a site of moral conduct.

However, in the context of secular mindfulness, which as we've seen, is often constructed in the absence of Buddhist ethics, it is understandable that critics like Slavoj Zizek for instance, might argue that mindfulness is a site of ethical vacuity, or emptiness. It contains the potential for good or evil, depending on how the individual chooses to make use of it. Indeed, Zizek likens it to the force in Star Wars, saying that practitioners are poised between the dark side of the Sith, and the light side of the Jedi. But that the force itself makes no necessary tendency in either direction.

So for these reasons and others the use of mindfulness in the military today is seen by some commentators as a dangerous perversion of the moral intentionality of mindfulness. For others, however, soldiers are simply people, too. And they perform invaluable tasks for the societies that they protect. Indeed soldiers work in some of the most stress inducing and traumatizing environments imaginable. So it seems entirely appropriate that they should be given the opportunity to benefit from mindfulness training.

To be clear, as far as I'm aware, militaries are no longer pursuing a fantastical First Earth Battalion program to train psychic soldiers, warrior monks, or Jedi as allegedly attempted by the US Army in the 1970s. Soldiers are not taught to meditate in order to be able to levitate, walk through walls, or kill people with their minds. Rather, mindfulness training has been adopted by many militaries as an efficacious way to support soldiers dealing with stress, with trauma, with depression and anxiety disorders, including, importantly, post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Recent studies in this area have focused on how mindfulness interventions help soldiers to recover from their experiences in combat zones

after they return home. But also on how they can help soldiers to cultivate a form of mental armor before they are deployed.

Rather than, or as well as being a form of stress reduction, as we saw in MBSR, mindfulness in military context is also envisioned as a form of stress resilience, or resistance.

Preliminary studies also seem to suggest that mindfulness training makes soldiers less impulsive and more considered in their actions during deployment, raising the possibility of a more compassionate and less reactionary military intervention.

The basic idea in such contexts is that conventional military training makes soldiers physically resilient and tough. So why should it not also make them psychically or mentally resilient as well? Indeed, one of the customized mindfulness training programs for the military is called Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training, MMFT or M-Fit. Again, as with many of the issues we've looked at regarding mindfulness as a therapeutic technology, there seems to be clear water between the benefits to individual health and well-being provided by this training on the one hand. And then larger questions of the social, political, and ethical significance of this training for society as a whole on the other.

Taking a lead from this dilemma, in our next session we're going to look at the questions of mindfulness in education today. More than just about anywhere else, the educational setting is one in which society's norms and values are cultivated, defended, and ultimately challenged.