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## Finding Our Way Back into the Body Through Somatic Movement: A Journey Through the Meanings and Challenges of Mindfulness

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**Finding Our Way Back into the Body Through Somatic Movement:  
A Journey Through the Meanings and Challenges of Mindfulness**

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Mindfulness Studies, Lesley University

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January 2024

*In devotion to the sacred memory of my blessed father*

*Syedna Khuzaima Qutbuddin (1940-2016)*

*I miss you Bawaisab, and -- you are ever-present with me, in me, within me*

## Acknowledgments

The practice of mindfulness changed my life, it saved my life. I am ever-grateful for it. One of the most profound lessons I am learning through this practice is that the “I” I use to refer to myself is actually the “I” of Inter-being. Thich Nhat Hahn writes, “Everything relies on everything else in the cosmos in order to manifest—whether a star, a cloud, a flower, a tree, or you and me.” We inter-be and through our inter-being we co-create ideas, projects and communities that help us awaken to the truth of our oneness, our lovingness, our wholeness, our holiness, our fullness, our emptiness. And so -- this thesis has been created through the inter-beingness of uncountable beings, including all my ancestors and all who have inter-been with us in myriad and innumerable ways. And so -- there is a deep felt-sense of gratitude for each one, together present -- here, now. The heart wants to remember and name each one by their true name. It wants to rejoice in our inter-being. It wants to sing the song of gratitude, and offer loving-kindness to us all.

~ To my mindfulness teachers: Tara Brach, Nancy Waring, Melinda Franceschini, Alice Armstrong, Lisa Lombardi, Melissa Jean, David Cabrera, Andrew Olendzki, my Linden family of Cloud Sangha -- I am blessed to have your support in this on-going journey.

~ To my beloved mom, I love you and your love nourishes me.

~ To my beloved children: Sakina, Mohammed, Taher, Mustafa, Murtaza -- you are not far away; in every moment, I hold you close to my heart, I pray.

~ To my beloved sister Fatema, I am honoured to have you by my side.

~ To all my dear sisters, your deep care and kindness nurture me.

~ To my beloved niece Zahra, your beautiful fragrance fills me with joy.

~ To my dear friend Shivani, I cherish our friendship.

~ To Raphael, the safe space you provide is oxygen for my spirit.

May we all feel loved and held in the warm embrace of Grace, and walk each other home...

### **Abstract**

Mindful-movement practices such as walking meditation, yoga, tai chi, and qi gong can support the cultivation and deepening of a sustained and embodied mindfulness practice. Because of their intrinsic gentleness, these practices are inherently trauma-sensitive, and can facilitate a gradual healing and re-integration of the body-mind through developing body-awareness. Mindfulness of the body is the first foundation of mindfulness practice. However, because of widespread misunderstandings around the meaning and definition of mindfulness, the bodyfulness in mindfulness practice is not always recognized and/or practiced. Furthermore, since bodily experience is seldom within one's control, and because the body often times carries unresolved trauma, sustaining a focused and open attention within the body can evoke distress, which, even though it is a normal part and process of the practice, can be challenging to allow mindfully. This creative project, through the sharing of the science and benefits of body-awareness and embodied mindfulness, via my lived-transformational-experience of mindful-movement practices, invites the viewer to consider the value of embodied living through cultivation of body-awareness and embodied mindfulness; it encourages them to recognize the simplicity and profundity of mindful movement practices as a pathway to support healing, deep well-being, and transformation.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4J2HtUIG-9RL-t8s-0WlqtvvuITUaYdJ>

*Keywords:* body-awareness, mindfulness, mindful-movement, trauma-sensitive, transformation, challenges, well-being.

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**Finding Our Way Back into the Body Through Somatic Movement:  
A Journey Through the Meanings and Challenges of Mindfulness**

The body is considered to be ground zero for both suffering and happiness (Rejeski, 2008), and, according to the Buddha, the way out of this world of suffering is through the body, through “this fathom long carcass, with its perceptions and thoughts,” (Olendzki, 2010, p. 65). The body is the place where we can meet and work with suffering directly, in a way that helps us find a path -- through and out of it -- to the true happiness of freedom, for it is only within the body, and within our own specific embodied experience that we can find truth (Simmer-Brown, 2017). It is not surprising, therefore, that mindfulness of the body is said to be the first foundation of mindfulness (Goldstein, 2016); the practice of mindfulness is meant to help us find our way back into the body by imbuing the body with mindful attention, so that we can learn to meet the totality of our real-time, lived experience, as it unfolds within the body, moment to moment. As we learn to practice returning to the body, over and over and over again, with the intention to stay, sense and see clearly all that arises, with loving awareness, deep care and curiosity, we begin to experience first-hand the truth of impermanence, and impersonal imperfection, and transformation and awakening begin to happen organically at a cellular level.

However, for most people paying attention to the body is not just challenging, but can feel extremely distressing; one reason for this is that the body can be a storehouse for unresolved trauma (der Kolk 2014), and the practice of mindfulness is likely to make space for unresolved pain to resurface so that the practitioner has the opportunity to sense it, feel it and meet it, in the body, mindfully, in a way that supports healing (Levine, 2012). But if the practitioner does not have the capacity to hold what arises, and feels overwhelmed, and if they are not aware of trauma-sensitive practices that can help them pause, pivot and resource themselves when needed, they might remain stuck in a painful, unhealthy, and unhelpful

pattern of experiencing re-traumatization, which is contrary to the purpose of practice. In addition, common misunderstandings about the meaning of mindfulness as a stress-reduction technique, or a feel-good tool, can also prevent the practitioner from being open to allowing and working with unpleasant experiences when they occur; they might either think that something is wrong with their practice or abandon the practice altogether. Furthermore, the encountering unresolved trauma in the body can sometimes lead to bypassing, which means using techniques and tools that disguise themselves as mindfulness practice in order to bypass and avoid what is painful, while creating an illusion of transcendence (Simmer-Brown, 2017). All the above can hinder the development of an embodied mindfulness practice.

Mindful-movement practices offer a trauma sensitive entryway into mindful meditation practice (Treleaven, 2018), and can support the development of a sustained and embodied mindfulness practice for all practitioners, including those who do not understand the real meaning of mindfulness, and/or are not aware of the possible impact of practice on unresolved trauma. Practices such as tai chi and qi gong, mindful walking, expressive meditation, the Islamic ritual prayer, yoga, etc, which involve a conscious intention to focus attention gently on body movement can gently open up a doorway into the body, in a way that reduces the possibility of re-traumatization. Additionally, engaging with these practices can lead to an experiential understanding of embodied, trauma-sensitive mindfulness in a way that can sometimes seem more easily accessible than sitting practice. In fact, there are historical narratives about monks and nuns who attained awakening not through sitting meditation, but through practicing mindfulness while standing, walking, lying down, and so forth (Goldstein, 2016). Mindful-movement practices support re-integration of the body-mind which is the path to healing and transformation (Schmalzl et al., 2014). My own journey of healing through mindfulness has been immensely supported by mindful movement practices and it has sparked much curiosity regarding the role of body practices in being able to



mindfully meet the challenges that are likely to arise when one plumbs the depths of mindfulness practice in order to harness its transformational power.

Based on my own lived experience and a growing body of research documenting and supporting the efficacy of contemplative mindful movement practices as a pathway to healing and deep well-being (Mehling et al, 2011; Schmalzl et al., 2014; Schuman & Mostofsky, 2015; Russell & Arcuri, 2015), I propose that inviting practitioners to engage in mindful-movement practices prior to or alongside the practice of sitting meditation can offer them an opportunity to experience the healing power of mindfulness in a trauma-sensitive way. Engaging in mindful-movement practices can also counter possible harmful effects due to mindfulness-related misunderstandings, by supporting practitioners in their intention to (a) develop a regular, embodied sitting meditation practice, and (b) to meet uncomfortable experiences that arise in the process of practice. To demonstrate the plausibility of my proposal, I begin by investigating the Buddhist and secular meanings and definitions of mindfulness, while simultaneously exploring its purpose in both contexts and highlighting the misunderstandings surrounding mindfulness. I then turn toward an examination of challenging experiences related to mindfulness, what they are and why they occur, and consider how somatic mindfulness and mindful movement can help navigate some of those experiences in a way that is trauma-sensitive and that supports the development of a sustained and embodied practice. Through a deep dive into the above avenues, this paper highlights gaps in the literature, and underscores possible areas for continued research.

### **Mindfulness: Definitions and Meanings**

There is neither one universally accepted technical definition of mindfulness nor any broad agreement about detailed aspects of the underlying concept to which it refers (Van Dam et al. 2018). The origin of the word can be traced back to Thomas W. Rhys Davids, one of the most celebrated Victorian scholars of Buddhism, who in 1881 translated the Pali term

sati as mindfulness (Buswell et al, 2022). Buddhist texts consider sati to be a factor that is necessary and conducive to enlightenment, and one that is needed for engaging in any type of meditation practice (Buswell et al, 2022). Moreover, the terms sati and sampajanna often appear together in Buddha's teachings; sampajanna, usually translated as "clear comprehension," refers to a type of awareness that has a reflexive quality, which entails an ethical monitoring of the state of one's body or mind, sometimes in relation to one's environment (Wallace, 2021). Similarly, mindfulness is meant to be a practice that nurtures wholesome mental and behavioural states that support awakening (Wallace, 2021); according to contemporary Buddhist scholar Olendzki (2016), mindfulness refers to a "benevolent quality of the mind," which is "always healing and never harmful;" it is an inherently healthy mental, emotional, behavioural factor or state that arises and passes away, moment to moment, in concurrence with consciousness and co-arising with factors such as trust, equanimity, nonattachment, and lovingkindness (Olendzki, 2020). Furthermore, the intention and purpose of cultivating and establishing mindfulness is to see things clearly, as they are, and thereby gain insight, and grow in wisdom and compassion (Olendzki, 2016).

The cultivation of mindfulness begins with inviting attention into the body, which is the first foundation of mindfulness; Johnson and Johnson (2022), in one of their articles in *Tricycle*, an independent, non-sectarian quarterly that publishes Buddhist teachings, practices, and critique, define mindfulness as "bodyfullness," "a full-bodied sensory experience;" in other words, there can be no mindfulness without body-sense. Body-sense is the ability to pay attention to our bodies, our feelings, sensations and emotions, our body, in the present moment, without getting caught up in judgment (Maull, 2022). Soma Thera (1998), in his commentary on the Satipattana Sutta, writes about the four arisings of mindfulness, as taught by the Buddha, to be a direct path to liberation: body, feelings, consciousness and mental objects. When considered from the perspective of modern science,

the body and mind are not separate; without the body there would be no feelings, consciousness, or mental objects, and so the body is the primary foundation of the practice. These explanations and interpretations of mindfulness are all grounded in Buddhist teachings, even though they have been espoused in a secular context.

Compare them to the definition of mindfulness as “present-moment, non-judgemental awareness” or “a state of awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience from moment to moment,” one of the most widely-accepted, secular definitions of mindfulness (Upton et al., 2022; Solhaug et al., 2016, p.839). These definitions were offered by Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of the 'Stress Reduction Clinic,' in 1979, in order to legitimize the usage of an originally religious, Buddhist practice in a modern clinical setting. It is noteworthy that there is no mention of ethics, intention, or the body in this definition, even though intention and body both fall in the realm of the secular, and even though disembodiment and automaticity (non-conscious intentionality) are a global phenomenon in today’s world. In fact, the kind of attention referred to in this definition is misunderstood by many as “bare attention,” which subsumes an ethically neutral quality (Wallace, 2021). As explained above, in its original meaning, mindful attention refers to an attention suffused with alertness, ardency, intention and comprehension. It is also vigilant and engaged with the heart and the whole body, and inherently caring and respectful, responsive, and discerning, and is meant to be a way of training the heart and mind, that can lead to freedom from the afflictive habits and patterns cause suffering (Feldman & Rudgard, 2022). Interestingly, Mark Epstein (2013), author of the book, *The Trauma of Everyday Life*, speaks of bare attention as one that relates but does not react; he points out the paradox of this kind of bare attention, an attention that is not coloured by preferences, by saying that “it changes the psyche but not trying to change

anything at all” (p.32). However, these nuances and underpinnings of mindfulness are not elucidated in its aforementioned secular definition.

Furthermore, according to some Buddhist scholars, the definition “moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness,” is -- simply and categorically -- inaccurate and incomplete and incorrect; it is “not what mindfulness has historically meant in Buddhism” (Buswell et al, 2022). To give an example, one scholar writes about what he calls a “kind of game...called ‘Buddhism no Buddhism’ being played by some secular mindfulness teachers who claim Buddhist authority for the practice but then divorce it from its original purpose, he draws attention to what he sees as deception and the loss of ethics around offering a practice which is essentially grounded in ethical values (Tejadhammo, 2021, p. 95). Many scholars continue to express apprehensions regarding the confusions and loss of clarity around a practice that is essentially meant to support clear seeing; there is deep concern regarding the risks and dangers of divorcing mindfulness from its Buddhist origins, teaching it as a stand-alone technique rather than a relational practice to be developed within a framework of morality, and alongside the cultivation of qualities such as loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, and wisdom (Buswell & Buswell, 2022; Wallace, 2021; Tejadhammo, 2021). In fact, Jon Kabat-Zinn himself acknowledges the definition offered by him as “one of convenience,” -- based on constructs most readily understandable to Western audiences (Van Dam et al. 2018, p.3) -- rather than one which incorporates its ethical foundations.

On the other hand, some secular definitions offered by renowned mindfulness teachers do invite a recognition of the foundational ethics of mindfulness. For example, Christina Feldman (2004), a teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA, defines mindfulness as the willingness and capacity to be present with “discernment, curiosity, and kindness” (p...); by including the word kindness she has highlighted an implicit aspect of mindfulness that can be antidote to the reality of self-loathing, judgmentalism, and harsh-

criticism prevalent in Western and global culture. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) too, while offering a secular definition, goes on to emphasize the development of wisdom and insight as a natural outcome of mindfulness, which is very aligned with Buddhist thought. He speaks of mindfulness as a practice of befriending ourselves and of mindful awareness as an ever-accessible, inner safe haven and protective refuge (Kabat-Zinn, 2005); here again, highlighting the aspect of self-compassion within the practice of mindfulness reflects the current need to ethically and wisely address the mindset of “not being enough and therefore not having enough,” which pervades our contemporary capitalistic culture.

Another example of a modification of the original approach, as a way to wisely respond to current reality is something Schmidt & Miller (2022) call “reverse-warrior practice;” this approach entails practicing for shorter periods of time, practicing self-compassion, getting good rest, and eating properly, focusing on balance rather than progress, remembering that it is not a weakness to be gradual (Schmidt & Miller, 2022). Reverse-warrior practice is clearly contradictory to the “warrior-style practice” advocated by traditional Buddhist teachings; nonetheless, it is a wise approach conducive not only to traumatized practitioners, but also to practitioners growing up in culture that is a trauma-laden, super achievement-oriented and driven, which includes most of us. Drawing from the wisdom of the reverse-warrior practice, I suggest that incorporating mindful movement as an essential component of mindfulness meditation could be part of an ethically sound approach to mitigating some of the harmful effects caused due to misunderstanding around mindfulness relating to current realities of our traumatized world.

One of the reasons for the misunderstandings around mindfulness is that the people who speak about it are speaking about mindfulness from a headspace, a what-can-it-do-for-me space, rather than through the experience of embodied practice, and so, the way back to a real understanding and experience is through embodiment, which can be strongly supported

through somatic mindful movement practices. It is important to recognize that there are many teachers who do offer mindfulness in a secular context, mindfully, embodying the wisdom and compassion that mindfulness practice is meant to nurture. However, even these definitions do not explicitly convey the essential role of the body in mindfulness. Perhaps one reason for that is that it is only recently, with the growing body of research around trauma and the body, that the real, almost urgent need to underscore the essentiality of the body in practice is being recognized.

It seems important to mention here that considerable discrepancy about definitions is a normal and common aspect in the study of complex constructs such as mindfulness (Van Dam et al. 2018). Even though the oft-quoted secular definitions of mindfulness fall short of the profundity that mindfulness truly embodies, and even though it is important to investigate why that might be so, it is also important to recognize, with some appreciation, that the secularization of mindfulness has made it available, accessible, and acceptable to large numbers of people who might not have been open to it had it been offered to them as a Buddhist practice. In the last couple of decades, mindfulness has achieved widespread popularity in psychology, psychiatry, medicine, neuroscience, and beyond, through its central role in mindfulness-based stress reduction (Van Dam et al. 2018). This reality, however, has also given rise to a huge number of challenges, which researchers, scholars, and teachers of mindfulness are now starting to acknowledge, appreciate and address, ever-more mindfully.

Studies show that the understanding and interpretation of mindfulness have a considerable effect on the practitioner's lived experience and extent of their engagement with the practice (Solhaug et al, 2016); the more comprehensive conceptions of mindfulness were associated with deeper engagement, while the instrumental conceptions were related to attaining a certain outcome in the form of a particular state of mind. These findings clearly demonstrate that the way in which mindfulness is understood by the practitioner influences

their experience of and engagement with it. More research is needed to explore how the experience of mindfulness practice can shape understanding of mindfulness itself, and whether engagement with somatic mindful movement practices can lead to an experiential understanding of the transformative potential of mindfulness. In this context, it seems ever more important to highlight the role of the body in mindfulness practice while also at the same time acknowledging that the body is a store house of trauma and therefore the need for trauma sensitive mindfulness, which include body practices, without which there might be a risk of bypassing or re-traumatization or abandonment of the practice altogether.

### **Effects of Mindfulness Practices: Benefits and Challenges**

The secularization of mindfulness and its role in the ability of its technical aspect to induce relaxation and calm has brought about a strong scientific interest in the practice. There is a growing body of research around the effects of mindfulness practice, but it is almost exclusively focused on pleasant and positive health-related benefits (Lindahl et al., 2017) which are frequently misunderstood as the main purpose of the practice. While these benefits are oftentimes real, they only reflect one portion of the many possible (side) effects of mindfulness practice. There are quite a few challenging and unpleasant effects and outcomes of the practice that are a normal part of the practice process, and have much value in terms of inviting the practitioner to be with discomfort; yet these affects are not much known and much less studied. One reason for the lack of awareness and lack of research is the semantic ambiguity of the word mindfulness which gives rise to misunderstandings around the meaning of mindfulness (Lindahl et al., 2017); another is that unpleasantness does not sell. There is burgeoning research around the health benefits of mindfulness practice, and several studies have documented many sought-after side-effects of mindfulness meditation, such as enhancing self-regulation, stress-management, self-compassion (Treleaven, 2018). In addition, popular media makes exaggerated and false claims about the effects of mindfulness

practice, where sometimes it is portrayed as an essentially universal panacea for various types of human deficiencies and ailments (Van Dam et al. 2018); this further adds to the non-acceptance of unpleasantness during practice, which results in an unwillingness to work with discomfort in practice.

Speaking to this peril, some scholars use the word “mindfulness mania” to emphasize their concern regarding mindfulness being misconceived as an undisputable prescription for high blood pressure, obesity, depression, substance abuse, relationship problems, etc (Buswell & Buswell, 2022; Van Dam et al. 2018, p. 12). Many contemporary scholars as well as teachers consciously spell out and clarify that the purpose of meditation is not to improve physical, emotional, mental health; relaxation, improved health, and success in work, when and if experienced, are simply “side effects,” of the practice, even though these are the reasons why many people are attracted to mindfulness (Goleman et al., 2017). However, in the original practice of mindfulness, as Tejadhammo (2021) states very clearly and simply, “there is no goal or striving for something” (p. 95); and for those who are inclined to harness the scientifically-researched motivational-power of setting a goal, Buddhist teachings on mindfulness and meditation propose that the “true contemplative goal” is the “beneficial changes in qualities of being during daily life,” which are experienced through sustained practice (Goleman et al., 2017); simply put, the real purpose of mindfulness meditation is to help us connect with and trust our basic goodness (Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, 2022b). For the practitioner to truly experience the transformational potential of this practice, it is important that they realize its true purpose, and practice with the intention to awaken and transform, rather than with the implicit or explicit agenda to avoid pain and discomfort and unpleasantness. Practicing with the intention to transform entails being open and learning to work with unpleasant and challenging states that arise during practice; mindful movement practices are aligned with such an intention.



Buddhist commentaries not only openly acknowledge such experiences, but also consider them to be a normal part of the process of awakening. Even though such states are very well-documented in the Buddhist texts (FitMind, 2020), scientific research around the more challenging outcomes of mindfulness practice has been comparatively sparse and is much less acknowledged. Nonetheless, more than 20 published studies have reported other kinds of side-effects, which are not only unpleasant but also challenging, such as anxiety, panic, agitation, insomnia, hallucinations, loss of appetite, involuntary movements, types of dissociation, loss of emotion, psychosis, mania, depersonalization (Van Dam et al. 2018; FitMind 2020). Such experiences have been reported by around 25% of meditators, including those who practice for less than an hour daily (FitMind, 2020).

Despite such studies, and even though there is a growing research-based conversation around the challenging experiences mindfulness can evoke (Olendzki, 2015), there is still a prevalent misunderstanding that such experiences should not be happening and that they are always harmful. The unnecessary suffering they can lead to if not acknowledged and addressed mindfully can cause real harm; however, these effects are often labelled as harmful simply because of their unpleasantness (Van Dam et al. 2018; FitMind, 2020). In fact, the term used, in scientific contexts, to refer to the normal, challenging effects of practice is “adverse” or “harmful” effects (Van Gordon et al, 2017, Aizik-Reebs et al, 2021), which itself points to two inherent assumptions: (1) if an effect unpleasant, it is adverse and harmful, (2) if an effect is unpleasant (and because mindfulness should result in pleasantness) it should not be occurring. These inaccurate assumptions point towards the validity of the concern many Buddhist scholars have regarding the misunderstanding of mindfulness, and the resultant harm that might cause.

As aforementioned, Buddhist sources state that meditation practices are expected to cause “perceptual, affective, epistemic, and behavioural shifts” that do not fall under the label of

health-related outcomes associated with scientific research (Lindahl et al., 2017, p.2). Britton's (FitMind, 2020) conversation with a meditation teacher in the context of her research findings reflects this; the teacher told her that it was a well-known fact that "meditation, when you do it enough, makes you stop sleeping," and went on to say that it was wrong of psychologists to make meditation out to be a relaxation technique (FitMind, 2020). If mindfulness practice is likely to bring up challenging experiences, how can practitioners learn to navigate such challenges more wisely and skilfully?

Olendzki (2016) offers a meaningful perspective; he writes that mindfulness is a transformational practice and real psychological transformation is likely to entail some measure of discomfort and difficulty, and learning to work with difficulty and discomfort is a necessary part of the process. This kind of difficulty, therefore, is an opportunity to transform, and need not necessarily be harmful. He goes on to acknowledge that in situations when the practitioner is in extreme distress, intensive meditation is clearly contraindicated. I suggest that the upfront and gentle acknowledgement of the possibility and likelihood of challenging experiences, as well as the normalization of discomfort, might actually support practitioners in being able to meet them skilfully. At the same time, it is also important to recognize "how much of this is healthy, even if painful, and at what point it may become unhealthy" (Olendzki, 2016). When it becomes overwhelming and causes re-traumatization, it is clearly unhealthy; at such times, it is wise for the practitioner to pause, pivot, resource themselves, and then go back to practice and meet the stuff that arises, without becoming overwhelmed.

I suggest that one way of resourcing might be engaging in somatic mindful movement practice; there is a growing body of evidence pointing towards the immense benefits of somatic mindful movement practices, also known as movement based embodied contemplative practices or MECP (Schmalzl et al., 2014, Vendetti et al, 2020). Drawing from

my personal experience, I suggest that for people who are highly traumatized (and might not even know it) mindful movement such as qi gong, yoga, mindful walking as well as expressive meditation practices can prevent re-traumatization by helping the practitioner meet the mind through the body (meet thoughts and feelings through sensations) and move through the discomfort and challenging side effects of practice, with some measure of ease and skilfulness; additionally, such practices can also support the cultivation of a sustained and embodied sitting practice.

Yet another question worth considering is: If mindfulness practice is likely to bring up challenging experiences, how can scientific researchers design, conduct and publish studies in a way that acknowledges the normalcy and necessity of learning to meet discomfort as part of the practice-process, and also affirms the value of doing so, and in a way that does not stigmatize and label challenging experiences as adverse and harmful? Furthermore, how might such studies contribute towards amending the misunderstandings around mindfulness, and towards recognizing that it is the misunderstandings that cause harm, not mindfulness?

One specific harmful effect of mindfulness not being understood as an inherently embodied practice, which is perhaps lesser-known, yet common, and which needs to be highlighted, examined, and understood well because of how it can disguise itself as a benefit, is spiritual bypassing. Spiritual bypassing is a term coined by Buddhist psychologist John Welwood in 1984 to describe “a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks, all in the name of enlightenment” (Welwood, 1999, p.176). He goes on to say that “the underlying verb in spiritual bypassing is “fixing,” with less emphasis on “feeling,” “knowing” and/or “accepting” (Simmer-Brown, 2017, p.76).

When mindfulness meditation is misunderstood as a way to be free of pain, spiritual bypassing can sabotage the true potential of this transformational practice and reduce it to just

another defence mechanism, albeit disguised as transcendence, and use it as a way to avoid or dull pain. Simmer-Brown (2017) writes about meditation being hijacked by the prevailing culture of taking pills to alleviate pain or numb anxiety; instead of “turning toward” what is present and alive in every moment, with curiosity, care and discernment, the ability to steer and focus attention is used – or misused - as a means to turn away from, turn a blind eye to and dismiss or deny, all that is unpleasant by choosing to focus only on that which is pleasant and which does not evoke discomfort. People engaging in spiritual bypassing are often drawn to and intellectually focused on teachings about selflessness and ultimate states, which they use as a rationale, a justifiable excuse, for not dealing with their own psychological wounding; they seem to confuse a co-dependent version of self-negation with true selflessness (Welwood, 1999). However, it is the embrace of the wisdom of all emotions that signals the way to true spiritual growth (Simmer-Brown, 2017), and the way to truly embrace all emotions is by being present within (with and in) the body. Embodied mindfulness practice can therefore protect against spiritual bypassing; similarly, somatic mindful movement, because it primarily invites attention to focus on the body moving, can support embodiment and prevent the practitioner from falling into the trap of bypassing, whether it be spiritual or intellectual.

A moment to pause and consider some more questions: If the true purpose of mindfulness and meditation is not that which is being offered and promised to practitioners by the media and by some mindfulness programs, then how does a lay person, who wants to engage in practices which support their health, help them manage stress, find success, etc. navigate this dissonance? Similarly, how do teachers offer mindfulness in a way that does not put side-effects as the central goal of the practice, while also highlighting the possibility of experiencing these beautiful side-effects, and harnessing the motivation they can nurture in the service of the true purpose of meditation? These are questions that practitioners, teachers,

and researchers must consider. In the following section, I suggest that making mindful movement an integral part of mindfulness meditation practice can organically and implicitly, to some extent, counter the current challenges related to practicing mindfulness and related to misconceptions surrounding mindfulness.

### **Mindfulness of the Body & Mindful Movement**

#### **Body-Awareness: The First Foundation of Mindfulness**

Mindfulness of the body is the first foundation of mindfulness practice and is the “basis for every kind of accomplishment and for leading onward to nibbana, to awakening” (Goldstein, 2016, p.46). In other words, the only path to liberation is through the body, and it is only by “being mindful of the body in the body” bringing awareness into the body that mindfulness can be established (Kornfield, 2020). This means that mindfulness that is not embodied is not really mindfulness. Embodied mindfulness practice entails paying attention to body sensations as direct perception (perception that is not mediated by thought), “both internally and externally, and “worldly and unworldly” (Simmer-Brown, 2017, p.86). Thai Buddhist teacher Ajahn Buddhadasa says: “Do not do anything that takes you away from your body” (Brach, 2012). This powerful teaching is a simple and clear invitation to keep coming back, over and over again, into the body. Similarly, Jack Kornfield (2021), who has been teaching meditation internationally since 1974, writes that “healing starts by simply becoming mindful of the body as it is [and] mindfulness of the body means developing awareness of who we truly are” (p...).

In addition, scientific research states that without being able to feel and interpret our physical sensations, we cannot truly know ourselves (der Kolk, 2015). In other words, when we are paying mindful attention to the body, we are in fact bringing a loving awareness to all that we are, and thereby offering an invitation to all that we are to be known, held, and healed in loving awareness. Dr. Reggie Ray (2022), in the article, *Touching Enlightenment with the*

Body, writes that meditating with the body is not about learning a technique, but rather a “readjustment of the focal length of our consciousness” by gradually tuning into the awareness that is already in the body. He describes it as not something we do, but a way of learning how to be differently. In other words, by tuning into our bodies, we learn a beingness that organically manifests into doingness, into wise-action.

In order to help ourselves tune into the body’s intrinsic awareness, we can reaffirm the intention to befriend and honour our bodies and bring a quality of tenderness to our attention which can enable us to sense subtle sensations. Body-awareness can be an ever-available gateway into presence, because the body does not live in the past nor in the future; it is always present (Buswell & Buswell, 2022); it is, therefore, always and already mindful (Baker & Baker, 2023). Bringing attention to the body brings us into the present, and not remain caught up in thoughts about the past or future.

The breath is often-times the pathway that can help us find our way into the body and then anchor us in a way that helps us stay there and flow with the flow of changing sensations of the body (Johnson & Johnson, 2022). Paying attention to the constantly changing sensations of the body can be a direct experience of the truth of impermanence (Goldstein, 2016); it can also help us open our hearts to receiving the wisdom of the body, and allow ourselves to be guided by it (Ray, 2022); it can help us turn toward and be present even with uncomfortable, unpleasant, or painful physical sensations. Brach (2003) points out that all our reactions to thoughts, external situations, people, and emotions are actually reactions to physical sensations in our body, and by tuning into these sensations and experiencing them directly, we not only allow them to organically relax and dissipate, but also protect ourselves from being hijacked by our reactionary ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, in a way that enables to choose a response that is wise and compassionate. Furthermore, letting go into the body by bringing attention to it can also help let be and let go of ruminative thoughts that

tend to hijack attention and keep it caught up in the illusory identity of a solid, separate self. These are a few examples of the pathways and mechanisms through which body-awareness, mindfulness of the body, or embodied mindfulness practice can support deep well-being, learning and transformation.

Each of us must find our own way into the body's sensory field. It can be through breath, the movement of the belly, touch points; it can be through interoceptive awareness, sensing our heartbeat, or the inner vibrations of our breath moving through the body. In fact, some scholars have argued that awareness of the body from the inside, or interoception, is foundational to mindfulness and could be the primary mechanism through which benefits of the practice ensue (Gibson, 2019). Beharrell (2019), in the article, "Transformation and the Waking Body: A Return to Truth via Our Bodies," states that by being more interoceptively aware, we open ourselves to an encounter with divine presence immanent in the world around us, and by re-establishing connection with our bodies we can change our perception of self and cultivate a sense of spiritual contentment. These words point to the powerful potential that embodied practice is meant to help us tap into.

Furthermore, der Kolk (2105) states that it is our relationship with our bodies determines our sense of agency; and embodied practice can help us cultivate a mindful relationship with our bodies in a way that can enable us to reclaim our authenticity and agency in a compassionate and wise way. In other words, embodiment can lead to empowerment. On a similar note, Beharrell (2019), in the abovementioned article, states embodied sensory perception can facilitate embodied knowing, and embodied knowing can enable the process of transformation, healing, integration, self-realization, and ultimately self-transcendence. In other words, when we pay attention to the physical, tactile sensations of the body, and are able to tune into our ability to be exteroceptively and interoceptively aware of our body, we get access to a lot of meaningful data about the lived reality of the body. This information is

only accessible through embodied awareness; it not only helps activate neuro-feedback loops which enable self-regulation in an organic way, it also opens the doorway into deeper and deeper states of consciousness, almost as if we are sinking deeper into the cellular realm (Maull, 2022). It is not surprising then, that the embodied practice of mindfulness holds the potential for transformation at a cellular level and genetic level (Vendetti et al, 2020).

### **Body-Awareness & Unresolved Trauma**

While it is true that the body is the only pathway to real mindfulness practice, it is also true that the body can also be a store house for unresolved past traumas (der Kolk, 2014), and therefore paying attention to the body requires cultivating the ability to pay attention to the pain of unresolved trauma, or pay attention to stored, unresolved, autonomic nervous system activity (Levine, 2012), or pay attention to everything in the body that demands attention. Most if not all human beings carry trauma, and therefore, bring attention to the body and keep it there can be very challenging. Because “the body keeps the score” (der Kolk, 2014), when attention is brought to the body, awareness can come face to face with difficult and uncomfortable sensations and emotions. In some cases, when dissociation occurs, awareness cuts off from certain sensations, emotions, or thoughts, due to failure of integration that occurs due to trauma (Treleaven, 2018), and this can lead to a feeling of numbness, which can also be challenging to stay with. It is important to mention here that while dissociation is a useful trauma-coping strategy, it can keep trauma survivors stuck in patterns that are meant to keep away pain. Embodied mindfulness practice -- bringing attention to the body, time and again, mindfully, wisely, and gently -- can make space for unresolved past traumas to resurface in the realm of loving awareness, it can act as a safe invitation for dissociated sensations, emotions, and thoughts to reappear and show themselves, which then makes it possible for them to be met, processed, and held in a way that enables healing through (their) re-integration (Levine, 2012).



Furthermore, meeting our traumas in the body allows us to work with our emotions, feelings, thoughts in a very tangible kind of way, because we are sensory beings and sensations are our most direct way of relating to life; the body is the place where we directly experience the entire unfolding of our life, our identity, our beingness, through the unfolding of sensations (Rejeski, 2008). Embodied mindfulness practice can help us be present with that experience – with ourselves and with life -- in a way that enables not only an embodied knowing of reality and truth, but also an empowered sense of agency in shaping the very nature of our meaning and existence (Johnson, 2017). It is worth reiterating here that mindful embodiment can lead to real empowerment. It is also important to point that there are times, when resurfacing of trauma can cause overwhelm and re-traumatization, especially when the practitioner does not have the guidance or support to help them navigate challenging experiences arising due to past traumas (Treleaven, 2018). Misunderstandings around the meaning of mindfulness can also result in re-traumatization; when challenging experiences are pushed away because of the belief that they should not arise in mindfulness practice, they persist and can cause even more suffering. In such situations, trauma-sensitive mindfulness practice can prevent re-traumatization and can support practitioners in moving through challenging states, with deep compassion, wisdom, and skilfulness.

### **Mindful-Movement**

I suggest that mindful movement practices are inherently trauma-sensitive, and inviting practitioners to integrate mindful movement practice as an essential component of mindfulness practice can reduce the risk of re-traumatization, and can also facilitate an experiential understanding of embodied mindfulness. Practicing mindful movement as a way to gently re-enter the body's wounded inner landscape can be a wise alternative to sitting practice (Treleaven, 2018). For trauma survivors, it might be easier to stay with body sensations while moving, rather than while sitting in meditation. Paying attention to the body

as it moves can help notice how breath moves through the whole body, and can take us into what Johnson & Johnson (2022) call “the world of bodyfullness.” The body moving can be experienced as the body breathing; awareness of the body breathing can pull the plug on “the consciousness of lost in thought” and can “effortlessly and spontaneously reveal” the awakened body and mind (Johnson & Johnson, 2022). For people who tend to fall into the trap of wanting to figure out emotions rather than get familiar with them and feel them, mindful movement can support a letting go of the analytical mind by inviting attention to rest in the body. For people who experience a lot of restlessness or sleepiness during sitting practice, mindful movement can help both settle attention through a gentle focus on movement, as well as energize attention and support alertness through movement itself. Mindful body movement can support bodyfullness, which in turn can support real, embodied mindfulness.

According to Schumann & Mostofsky (2015) body movement, such as yoga and tai chi, can lay the foundation for cultivation of mindful attention. Such movement-based, embodied contemplative practices encourage an embodied experience of the self - “being in one’s body” - and emphasize paying attention to an interoceptive, proprioceptive and a kinaesthetic awareness of the body (Schmalzl et al., 2014, p.2). An embodied experience of the self and an embodied awareness of the body can in turn support the development of a consistent and embodied mindfulness meditation practice. Moreover, reconnecting with the physical body through mindful, intentional movement can restore a sense of agency (Schmalzl et al., 2014), which can be an antidote to the sense of disempowerment and helplessness inherent in trauma, and can also help develop a sense of self-efficacy in being able to meet and process difficult emotions, including those arising due to unresolved trauma. Furthermore, working with emotions in an embodied way can help them metabolize at a cellular level in a way that facilitates deep healing. These practices can also be like a tool for reconstructing the self

through intentional and “carefully executed body movements” (Schmalzl et al., 2014, p.2); in other words, mindful body movement can result in an organic processing of unresolved trauma in the body in a way that enables the formation of a self that is transformed, and is not defined by its trauma. Through movement, the neuropathways of the brain can reach unresolved trauma stored in memory as sensations and new types of movement along with attention to the movement can release such memories and restructure such pathways without having to re-live the experience (Roberts, 2005). In these ways and more, mindful body movement can be a powerful healing practice.

### ***Example 1: Mindful Walking***

Walking meditation is a well-known mindful-movement practice; it can strengthen the “samadhi factor” and help strengthen the “continuity of awareness” and maintain the momentum of mindfulness (Goldstein, 2016). By slowing down and paying attention to a form of movement (walking) that we usually engage with without mindful awareness, we can begin to notice that even in this simple movement there is much going on. We can invite a heightened sense of curiosity and interest to something that is in one way familiar, yet appears new and fresh because of the kind of attention we bring to it. We can feel the “micro sensations -- lightness, heaviness, pressure, stiffness – in every moment,” which can help us experience a felt-sense of “embodied presence” (Goldstein, 2016, p.57). Furthermore, the intentional slowing down of muscle and joint movement during the walking practice, along with the concentrated focus on the slow and deliberate movement can evoke a feeling of “sinking into the earth” (Goldstein, 2016, p. 249), which in turn can help cultivate a resourceful sense of groundedness from which difficult emotions can be met. Goldstein (2016) suggests that one of the most helpful instructions for walking meditation is, “When walking, just walk” (p. 262). He goes on to explain how this simple reminder can help dissipate the urge to get somewhere or achieve some mystical meditative state. It allows us to

“settle back into the simplicity of the moment” (Goldstein, 2016, p.56). Simplicity of this kind is something that the complexity of the drama-trauma connect makes it difficult to experience, and so, when it is experienced in moments of mindful walking, it can offer an experiential glimpse of a felt-sense of freedom and joy present in the simplicity of just being - here, now.

### ***Example 2: Qi gong***

Another example of somatic mindful movement is qi gong, a super-gentle yet immensely powerful practice which can support mindful embodiment and healing. One of the central goals of qi practices is to “tune the mind so it becomes conscious of all the gross and subtle movements of energy within” the body (Frantzis, 2008, p. 6), which can provide access to, ...one's inner ecology,” and thereby support deep healing. Another key goal of this practice is to facilitate balance in the body’s energy by increasing the speed, strength and evenness of the circulation of chi, blood and other fluids in the body (Frantzis, 2008), which also supports healing by getting stuck energies of unresolved trauma unstuck and moving in a way that allows them to re-integrate and thereby bring the body back into balance. The gentle power of this practice, especially Dragon and Tiger qi gong, is reflected in the gentleness of the guidelines; the teacher offers phrases such as “Be gentle with yourself!” “Remember the 70% rule and do not try to be perfect!” “Be comfortable, physically, emotionally, energetically, mentally!” “Have a relaxed and open mind!” (Ryan, 2021), which invite the practitioner to infuse their attention with a gentle attitude, to help it permeate the body and tune into its subtle field of awareness and energy. The invitation to “slow down,” “not strive,” and “just do it - poorly or properly” (Ryan, 2021) all encourage the practitioner to relax into the body’s movements in a way that supports embodiment. This has practice has been truly transformational for me and has enriched my experience of all other mindful movement practices, and I am so grateful for it. Engaging in somatic mindful movement practices have

enabled me to work with trauma in the body and have deeply supported my healing process.

They have helped me come home into my own body, and find a resource and refuge in it.

They have also helped me deepen into an embodied mindfulness meditation practice.

### **Discussion**

In this paper, through scientific literature and learnings from my own lived-experience of mindfulness as a transformational practice, I have demonstrated the value of cultivating body-awareness or mindfulness of the body, the first and primary foundation for the practice of mindfulness, and the pathway to freedom and awakening. While doing this, I have also explained that since the body is the place where unresolved trauma remains stuck, bringing mindful attention to the body involves learning to feel, meet and work with unresolved difficult sensations, emotions, and feelings. Therefore, cultivating body-awareness can be challenging, and requires a trauma-sensitive approach to practice. I have highlighted the challenges around misunderstandings related to mindfulness, its meaning, its purpose and its effects and outcomes, and explicated how these challenges can exacerbate the challenge of cultivating body-awareness and a sustained and embodied mindfulness practice. Through a scientific examination of the aforementioned topics, I have proposed that mindful movement practices such as tai chi and qi gong, mindful walking, shaking and moving meditation, the Islamic ritual prayer are inherently trauma sensitive and can support a trauma sensitive cultivation of body-awareness and embodied mindfulness.

**Creative Project** <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4J2HtUIG-9RL-t8s-0WlqtvvuITUaYdJ>

To further advance this proposal, I have created a video project. It consists of a series of video clips that speak about body awareness and mindful movement through the lens of science and experiential practice. The video clips are not simply informational, rather a sharing of a real, lived-experience. The clips are meant to invite viewers to consider the value of embodied living through cultivation of body-awareness and embodied mindfulness; they

are meant to encourage viewers to recognize the simplicity and profundity of mindful movement practices in nurturing embodiment, and to realize that these practices can support deep well-being: a healthier body and mind, the making of conscious choices from a space of empowerment and responsibility; they are meant to inspire viewers to invest consistent effort in learning and practicing mindful movement, as a way to navigate life and the path of transformation.

The video clips consist of monologues and dialogues speaking of body-awareness and mindful movement practices, offering teachings and scientific evidence supporting the benefits of these practices, and sharing my lived experience of these practices, in a creative, simple, straightforward, and concise way. The clips include footage of the practice, artistic visuals, photographs, and poems meant to touch the viewer's heart and mind, to ignite a spark of playful curiosity and interest, and to nudge them gently – through the power of authentic sharing, reason and science, and artistic creativity – towards an exploration of these practices, with some openness and with a sliver of trust.

### **Conclusion**

Even though mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism, it has extended beyond that tradition into the sciences and Western contemporary culture (Gibson, 2019); it has increasingly permeated all aspects of contemporary society, and has become fraught with confusions around its definition, meaning, purpose, and outcomes. With its growing popularity, it is also becoming widely misunderstood, and as a result there is much ambiguity about what it is, whom it helps, and how it affects the mind and brain (Van Dam et al. 2018). Researchers underscore the need to raise awareness around misunderstandings related to mindfulness practice and its effects and outcomes, and to minimize any harm caused due to the misperceptions and false hype surrounding this practice (Van Dam et al., 2018). They also highlight the urgent need to address issues and challenges surrounding research on

mindfulness; these include the difficulties of defining mindfulness, which result in non-clarity about exactly what is being researched, which in turn affect methodology and interpretation of results, misinformation and proliferation of poor research methodology can potentially lead to people being harmed, cheated, dissatisfied, and/or disillusioned (Van Dam et al. 2018; Lindahl et al., 2017). Challenges evoked by mindfulness practice have also been studied and awareness around such challenging effects is slowly growing. Normalization of such states might contribute towards being able to navigate them more skilfully.

Mindfulness of the body is the first foundation of mindfulness practice. Finding our way back into the body can support us immensely in navigating the ambiguities around mindfulness, by experiencing a felt-sense of embodied mindfulness, and it can also help in navigating challenging states as we continue to deepen our practice. However, the body can be a storehouse for unresolved trauma and therefore bringing attention to the body requires bringing attention to the discomfort of unresolved trauma, and such discomfort can be quite distressing. Hence, the need to teach, encourage and engage with trauma-sensitive mindfulness practices which protect against re-traumatization, and support a skilful navigation of difficult states. Mindful movement practices are inherently trauma-sensitive and incorporating these into meditation practice can support the cultivation and deepening of a sustained and embodied mindfulness practice. At this point in time, it seems ever more important for all who are committed to uncovering and discovering the truth of mindfulness, to repeatedly take a mindful pause, pay attention, notice, and become more deeply aware of their own experience and felt-sense of practice. It is equally important to be open to listening and learning from the experience of fellow-practitioners, and through this practice engaging reflectively and reflexively in the scientific process of navigating multiple complexities and paradoxical realities, with the intention of clarifying and simplifying that which can serve the individual and collective well-being of practitioners.

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Thank you for your mindful attention.