

## Insight for Mindfulness Learning and Practice

**Abstract** There is much misunderstanding concerning learning and practicing mindfulness meditation. This chapter points out several common misunderstandings regarding mindfulness, and aims to provide readers with insight on how to learn and practice mindfulness efficiently. There are many ways of learning, but in general there are two types of learning strategies: implicit learning and explicit learning. Most people only believe and apply explicit learning to mindfulness meditation, but ignore implicit learning, which is also an effective method of skill acquisition. Based on many years of IBMT practice and teaching experience, this chapter proposes a novel and efficient way to learn and practice mindfulness both implicitly and explicitly.

**Keywords** Mindfulness learning • Mindfulness practice • Common misunderstanding • Insight • Implicit learning

### THE FIRST COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

John read many articles on the positive effects of mindfulness and decided to learn it. He then bought several popular books on mindfulness and studied the concept and knowledge of mindfulness practice in great details. He also searched online and downloaded lots of applied materials including the mindfulness instruction manuals. Although he worked hard following the manuals, he still could not really enter in the “mindfulness state” he

imagined or described in books and manuals. He felt that most of his mindfulness practices were dry and uncomfortable, although sometimes he had a feeling of relaxation. After a few months of practice, he gave up and thought mindfulness meditation was probably not a good fit for him. *This story reflects the first common misunderstanding about mindfulness learning and practice.*

Most people used to learn new things based on a concept and knowledge strategy stressing explicit learning. Therefore, they also learn mindfulness as a concept and knowledge (e.g., using a manual) rather than a direct experience. Can you imagine this picture: someone trying to learn how to swim in the water using a manual or book? In reality, this does not work well for learning a skill such as swimming. If you ask someone how to learn biking or swimming, you will be told: “just do it or practice it;” and you will then learn how to balance naturally. If you ask someone to describe in words how to float in water or balance on a bike, the person often could not tell you exactly how to float in water because this involves a different way of learning—implicit learning—through a direct experience and in an unconscious way, which always entails more than words can express (Tang 2009, 2017). Similar to what occurs in daily life, every night you lay down in bed to sleep, and your body naturally knows which position or posture is best for relaxation and rest. During this time, manual or language instruction does not help; you only need to follow the innate feeling—your body rhythm and wisdom—in order to fall asleep. Similarly, in mindfulness learning, the best approach is to first practice and experience, then understand and conceptualize. An experienced coach or trainer can help you and lead you into a deeper state directly through resonating with his/her direct experience, and we often use this strategy to guide novices in IBMT learning and practice. In the organizational behavior field, many studies have shown that a leader can influence and drive followers’ emotions and behaviors, as well as affect their brain activity (Tang 2017).

Humans believe the purpose of reading is to accumulate knowledge, and this concept is not entirely false. However, the key is to not get attached to any words or concepts, because they are just stepping stones that are meant to be left behind as quickly as possible. In Zen spirit, this is called “fingers pointing at the moon.” The words or instructions are just “fingers,” and those whose gaze is fixed upon the pointer will never see beyond. Even if you catch sight of the moon, you still cannot see its beauty. Therefore, the moon is the truth you want to pursue. This metaphor can help you think about how to learn and practice mindfulness efficiently.

## THE SECOND COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

American culture is one representative of a “doing culture,” in that the culture stresses that more effort and control—for example, being more “hard working”—is the only way to improve performance and achieve goals. However, this strategy does not fit mindfulness learning and practice well. In fact, some Eastern traditions favor effortless change (attention and action) in a completely natural and uncontrived way because this strategy more fits with the spontaneity of nature. Similarly, “trying not to try” has been proposed as another way to make changes by Western scholars recently, suggesting both effortful and effortless strategies are helpful (Bruya 2010; Slingerland 2014; Tang and Bruya 2017b).

The mindset that mindfulness needs strong mind control to clean up all your thoughts is not correct because by doing so, you take your own thoughts as your enemy in your conscious and unconscious mind and want to get rid of them. However, your thoughts are actually the exact reflection of your physical and mental states. If your physical and mental states do not change, your thought patterns remain the same. In fact, the right effort and appropriate control are the key to efficient mindfulness learning and practice. We often put considerable effort into a target such as breathing, thought process, and body feeling or sensation whenever we practice mindfulness. However, intensive and effortful practice makes our mind fatigue easily and even increases the stress hormone (cortisol) that can deteriorate and damage our body and brain/mind states. Some studies have shown that adverse events can occur with intensive mindfulness meditation during a retreat period. Therefore, only using mind control for mindfulness is not a natural method for our minds and for mindfulness practice. Trying hard to hold an object still is unnatural and difficult, because we restrict our attention so that it is narrow and static, but in reality the nature of mind is the opposite: natural, dynamic, relaxed, flowing, and spontaneous. *Trying hard to control the mind is the second common misunderstanding of mindfulness learning and practice.*

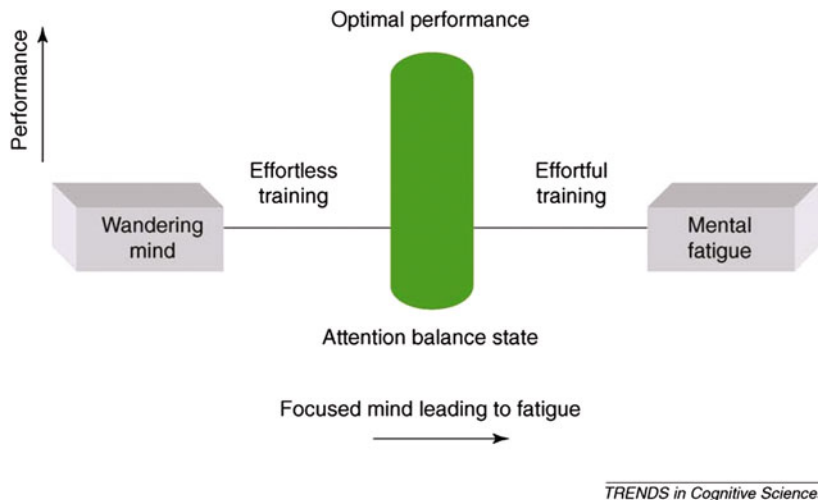
In nature, two seeds of the same tree in different environments can grow significantly differently, suggesting the impact of environment on growth. As mentioned earlier, research in organizational behavior has shown a leader’s impact on followers’ brains and behavior. This phenomena is also called ‘contagion effect’. In sports, a million dollar coach can build a world-class practice program for athletes to succeed and achieve optimal

performance. In the same vein, a qualified mindfulness coach or trainer has tremendous impact on a trainee's practice and mindfulness state. For example, during training sessions, an IBMT coach creates an environment and context for an effective learning and practice experience. The coach helps participants feel energy and sensation naturally beyond language and the logical mind. In contrast, following a detailed instruction in a manual sometimes does not work because this strategy involves processing our thinking more through language (Tang et al. 2007, 2012a, b, c). In addition, we also use metaphors as a means in IBMT teaching to further facilitate the mindfulness state. For instance, you hold a cup of ice water in your hands and immediately you can feel cold naturally, without any extra effort needed. Another example, an IBMT coach describes natural scenarios like catching the first glimpse of the sunrise and your mind registering its vibrancy, or getting the first feel of a breeze. In those moments, you are just there with full body and mind, right? The IBMT coach helps you be aware of that moment for a longer and longer time, so that the mind can reset and change. Moreover, an IBMT coach can help you achieve energy feeling or sensation directly that goes beyond language and thought processing. In other words, you are directly experiencing mindfulness practice by yourself rather than "thinking practice by yourself." Moreover, with continuous practice, you could even get a sense of "impermanence" through direct experience. In sum, even if you don't know how to plant an apple tree, you still can enjoy an apple.

As shown in Fig. 8.1, mind wandering and mental fatigue are two extremes of the untrained mind. Network training, such as computerized cognitive training and adaptive working memory tasks, often require continuous effort (effortful practice) to improve performance, whereas state training such as mindfulness meditation IBMT changes the body-mind state through effortless practice. Optimal balance (attention balance state) is hypothesized to trigger the most efficient performance—the deep meditative state (middle cylinder area) (Tang and Posner 2009; Tang and Bruya 2017b).

### THE THIRD COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

*The third common misunderstanding of mindfulness learning and practice is how to deal with expectation.* Jennifer is a professor and has long-term interests in Buddhist philosophy and psychology, mindfulness, and yoga. Over 30 years, she has accumulated more and more knowledge, but



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**Fig. 8.1** Attention, effort, and performance

unfortunately she has never had a real and direct experience of mindfulness. When she learned of our series of IBMT studies on campus, and that most students without any knowledge and experience could enter in mindfulness meditation state following the instruction of a qualified IBMT coach, she contacted me and requested a trial session of IBMT. We invited her to attend one evening IBMT session at 8:00 pm; however, she was late and could only find a seat close to the main door of the conference room, which faced a road and was noisy. She did not know anything about IBMT and had no any prior knowledge and expectation on what IBMT session would be like; consequently, she just naturally followed the coach's guide to practice. This is exactly the right mindset for learning and practicing IBMT. During this session, she was in a very deep state of IBMT and for the first time she had a direct experience with pleasant feelings!

The next morning, she excitedly told me that her ego had been completely absent the previous night when she was in the IBMT session. She did not realize time passing during her practice—which is amazing and wonderful! This novel and deep experience was so attractive to her that she requested a second session of IBMT. When I noticed her strong demand and expectation of a certain IBMT feeling, I told her that the expectation

of repeating certain feelings or experiences is actually the opposite of the mindfulness state, which is open, flexible, and non-judgmental. Although the expected mindset could disturb her practice quality, clearly she did not believe me. She arrived very early at 7:30 pm, before our session started, and told me that in order to repeat the same feelings and experience, she did nothing in particular in the whole afternoon and just waited for the night's session to begin. As I predicted, she did not get into the same deep IBMT state as she had the previous night because she wanted to control her feelings and experience so that they were exactly the same as before. In the end, she was very disappointed and upset. Jennifer's story actually provides an important insight during mindfulness learning and practice: experience first and conceptualize second.

In our series of IBMT studies, college students participate mainly for payment rather than for a certain expectation of meditation experience and feeling. Therefore, they are often open and flexible to any feelings and experience they may have, and there is no need to deal with expectations like those Jennifer had. This is also related to another key principle of mindfulness practice: trust the process. There are many things in the world that we don't know, but we believe we know, so we often follow our belief and preference rather than direct experience to guide our thinking, decision-making, and action. Therefore, our "filter" only allows us to see a part of the world and reality we want to see. In IBMT class, we invite you to follow the path of learning through doing and being. Put simply, first experience, and then conceptualization. We often suggest our participants not only focus on a goal they want to achieve through mindfulness, but instead, understand that "*the path is the goal*" (Tang 2009).

#### THE FOURTH COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

*The last common misunderstanding I propose here is the separation of body and mind in learning and practicing mindfulness.* As we discussed in Chap. 3, body-mind interaction is very important in mindfulness practice, especially in IBMT learning and practice. We often believe mental processes are more involved in mindfulness, and thus pay more attention to mind control. But in practice, mindfulness includes both physical and mental training. Body and brain/mind cannot be separated and are two important components to help achieve the mindfulness state. Based on

previous research, I have proposed that mindfulness states can be achieved in two ways: through mental processes (e.g., mindfulness) and through bodily processes (e.g., bodifulness). As I described in Chap. 3, the bodifulness refers to the gentle and holistic adjustment and exercise of body posture through balance and harmony techniques (Tang and Tang 2015). For instance, in Eastern traditions, practices like IBMT, TCM-based methods (e.g., Tai Chi, Qigong), and yoga, apply body-mind balance and interaction techniques to facilitate body-mind states and positive outcomes. It should be noted that bodifulness is different from aerobic (physical) exercise based on our and other studies, as it mainly activates the parasympathetic part of ANS function, which leads to a calm and relaxed state (see our body-mind interaction results in Chap. 3) (Tang et al. 2009). Although mindfulness often involves an explicit process (e.g., counting your breath) through the CNS (brain/mind), bodifulness mainly involves implicit process (e.g., visceral or interoceptive awareness) regulated by the ANS. People often believe and apply explicit learning and practice to mindfulness meditation but ignore the implicit learning, which is actually an effective way to acquire skills such as mindfulness (Tang and Bruya, 2017b; Tang et al. 2017c). Based on many years of IBMT practice and teaching experiences, We have found that an efficient way of mindfulness learning and practice is to integrate body (ANS) and mind (CNS) both implicitly and explicitly.

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