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The Mindful Society: Walking the Talk

by **Barry Boyce**

Speaking of mindfulness, we are told, the Buddha put it like this:

...when walking, a bhikkhu understands: "I am walking"; when standing, he understands: "I am standing"; when sitting, he understands: "I am sitting" when lying down, he understands: "I am lying down...."

Proceeding through the whole range of bodily experience, feelings, mind, and the objects of mind, the Buddha lets us know that simple awareness of what's going on in the moment is the gateway to wisdom and freedom from attachment. It's stunning how something so straightforward can take us so far. It seems to do so by setting us in the direction of seeing how readily we cling to our constructs and delusions.

But even as it provokes profound insights, mindfulness also yields immediate benefits. We begin to relax. We may listen to people better. We may listen to our bodies better. We may fight our pain less. We may back off the accelerator.

Appreciating these tangible benefits has inspired many practitioners to bring what they've learned in their Buddhist training to hospitals, schools, hospices, prisons, companies, and many other settings. This movement is steadily growing, and in this new department in the Sun we will report on the many programs, research projects, conferences, and frontiers in bringing contemplative disciplines to the broader society. Above all, we will report on the people who are helping others lead a life enriched by mindfulness and awareness, people like these three pioneers of the Mindful Society.

Since **Jon Kabat-Zinn**, founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, started the Stress Reduction Clinic at UMass in 1979, he has not stopped pursuing the goal of bringing mindfulness to a wider world. He is the author of *Full Catastrophe Living* and other bestselling books; the founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society; and a leading proponent of research-based approaches to promoting mindfulness. In a wide-ranging discussion recently, Kabat-Zinn told me, "The central mission of my work has been to bring the dharma, at its most universal, into the mainstream of human activity for the sake of basically all of us. Because that's so broad a mission, as a skillful means I chose consciously to anchor it in health care and medicine. I thought that would be the most fertile ground."

The Stress Reduction Clinic is celebrating thirty years of operation, which mirrors the flowering of MBSR and a new understanding in our society of the influence of mind on life. "It's virtually axiomatic now," Kabat-Zinn says, "that the mind and the body need to be on intimate speaking terms to function effectively in business, education, sports, even politics."

Yet Kabat-Zinn cautions that it's important to remain attentive to how mindfulness is taken up in the mainstream. "Mindfulness really has to do with the profound fact that our conventional view of ourselves and of the self is incomplete. We need to see why we mistake the actuality of things for some story we create." The best way to protect mindfulness' integrity, he said, is not to be a dharma cop, but to ensure that the practice is embodied. "It needs to be in the language, in the way one speaks, and in the way one carries oneself so that it's not an act or an elaborately defended thought construct."

In 1997, **Mirabai Bush** co-founded the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, in Northampton, Massachusetts, and became its first executive director. Under her leadership, the center has developed programs bringing contemplative practices into five key areas of society—academic, social justice, law, business, and research—and become a major sponsor of retreats and meetings in these and other arenas. Bush recently left the director's post and became a senior fellow, which has freed her to take on new projects just at a time when lots of possibilities are brewing.

Bush is an accomplished teacher and an energetic "connector," putting people and projects in touch with each other. When Google was looking for a new way to bring contemplative practice to their engineers after stress reduction had failed as a motivator, Tan-Chade Meng, who calls himself Google's "Jolly Good Fellow," called Bush. Before too long, Bush says, "We decided to develop a course on mindfulness-based emotional intelligence. The real goal was to bring mindfulness in, but we knew that it had to appeal to the engineers. Dan Goleman gave a talk on the connection between mindfulness and emotional intelligence. We then advertised a course, and in about the first

four hours, 150 people signed up for Search Inside Yourself: Mindfulness-Based Emotional Intelligence. Norman Fischer, I, and other teachers have been refining it over the course of a year, and we're about to teach the fifth iteration. We're learning a lot about ways to see mindfulness in the workplace. Scientists and engineers see it in the context of the neuroscience of meditation, and the SIY program helps them to work with the mind-body connection at a hands-on level."

The other project that's taking up a lot of her current attention came from an even more unlikely source. "A chaplain from the Army found me," she says, "which has led us to do a retreat for chaplains and medics. They see so much horror that they suffer from what they call 'compassion fatigue,' or 'lack of resilience.' Of course, this work raises many ethical issues that we're looking at carefully as we go." It's natural to oppose war, but what about taking care of the warriors, our fellow citizens? "The military is a huge area of moral concern in American life," Bush says, "and Buddhists haven't looked at it much at all."

The Zen Hospice Project, founded in 1987, arose from the experiences of caring for dying residents at the San Francisco Zen Center. It grew into a service for the larger community—caring for dying people with no overt element of Zen involved. Its founder, **Frank Ostaseski**, helped to make Zen Hospice unique, and highly successful, by creating a model in which volunteers, residents, family members, specialists, and those simply interested in the dying process could learn together on an equal and open basis. In 2004, he founded the Metta Institute, in Sausalito, California. Its primary program is the End-of-Life Care Practitioner Program, whose goal is to "establish a national network of educators, advocates, and guides for those facing life-threatening illness and the individuals and systems that serve them."

"Our work," Ostaseski says, "is about reclaiming the spiritual dimensions of the dying process. I've always thought there is a natural match between people who are cultivating the listening heart in meditation practice and people who really need to be heard—namely, people who are dying."

Though Ostaseski says he has moved from caregiving to mentoring, it's apparent caregiving is still a key motivator—in this case, caring for the caregivers themselves. "We wanted to reach out to people working every day in difficult circumstances in medical institutions, in environments far less supportive than Zen Hospice. How could they take spiritual practices into their workplace and benefit themselves and the people they serve?"

"Many people entered health care with a deep intention to serve and to reduce harm. They want an internal process, like mindfulness, that supports them as they go forward. In the dying process, there's little that can be done medically, so it becomes a natural place for caregivers to find deep resources that might be applied in the rest of health care."

Ultimately, he'd like to see the veil surrounding dying lifted so that "the lessons learned at the time of dying can have an impact for the rest of us in our everyday lives. I dream that one day hospices will be like YMCA's and corner churches, so broadly accepted that they won't be considered special at all."

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