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Types of mindfulness in an age of digital distraction



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Abstract In an age of digital distractions, mindfulness has become a billion-dollar industry that extends well beyond training to include products, services, and experiences. Attitudes on mindfulness vary from the cautious to the starry-eyed. However, one thing is certain: mindfulness is here and it is here to stay, as the conditions that gave rise to its popularity are only likely to intensify. Thus, it is incumbent upon managers to understand the phenomenon of mindfulness and this presents difficulties. The marketplace meaning of mindfulness has become so diffuse as to be almost meaningless, while the mainstream psychological definition is at best partial and at worst potentially myopic. In this installation of Marketing & Technology, we first explore the conditions that gave rise to the surge in interest in mindfulness. Second, by drawing on original source materials, we guide managers and marketing executives through the dimensions/types of mindfulness and integrate the various perspectives into two models. We conclude with an exploration of the opportunities and challenges that mindfulness poses to managers and marketing. © 2018 Kelley School of Business, Indiana University. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Exploring mindfulness

Various factors have combined to make mindfulness a rapidly spreading cultural trope and a multibillion-dollar business. The mindfulness industry has extended beyond training to include software

applications, wearable devices, and a cornucopia of products, services, and experiences. Attitudes to the phenomenon vary. Some embrace it with abandon, seeing a 1960s re-revolution, ‘turn on, tune in, and drop into the now’: a catholicon for personal and planetary problems. Others are suspect, smelling whiffs of sanctimony, sandals, and sandalwood: a nostrum for the naive. Whatever one’s attitude to the phenomenon, one thing is certain: it is here and it is here to stay. The circumstances that have led to its widespread embrace are only likely to compound. Thus, it is incumbent upon managers in general and marketers in particular to understand the phenome-

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non, and this immediately presents problems. Mindfulness' marketplace meaning has become so defuse as to render the term almost meaningless, while the widely adopted psychological definition of the term is at best partial and at worst myopic.

In terms of the marketplace, there are courses (mindfulness training is one of the fastest growing industries in the U.S. with over 25% of companies now offering mindfulness training). There are over 1000 apps. The most popular, Headspace, has been downloaded over 10 million times. There are numerous wearable devices that assist mindfulness, such as headbands that monitor brain activity and provide feedback on one's mental state (Scott, 2017). Beyond this, there are products such as mindfulness bracelets (a type of rosary), mindful bites (a collection of high-calorie snacks), mindful oils (aromatic lotions), mindful meats (organic meat), services such as mindful farms (organic farms where you can volunteer), mindful chefs, mindful cleaners, and mindful lawyers. On the book front, there are a profusion of titles. Some are thematic, such as the mindful mom-to-be, mindful birthing, and the mindful child, quickly followed by mindful discipline. Other titles are miscellaneous, such as the mindful athlete, mindful education, mindful eating, mindful money, and the mindful entrepreneur. Recently, there was even a Mindful Pledge Drive on National Public Radio.

Its Western psychological definition—as non-elaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness (Bishop et al., 2004)—is a far cry from the original meaning of the Buddhist term, *sati*, which initially meant 'to remember,' but was expanded upon and evolved as Buddhism developed. Indeed, the 'bare attention' meaning of mindfulness only arose in the 20th century through the writings of Nyanaponika Thera (1962), a German-born Sri-Lankan monk. Thus, the semantic range of the term mindfulness has become substantially curtailed in Western psychology and, in the general marketplace, its scope has been stretched so far as to render it a Rorschach figure onto which people project almost anything (Hefferan, 2015).

This article has three goals. First, to explore the context and conditions that have led to the surge in interest in mindfulness. Second, we clarify what is meant by mindfulness by tracing its hermeneutical Buddhist roots and offer a typology to show that there are at least four different types of, or aspects to, mindfulness. These can be mapped onto two dimensions and can be organized into a nested progression. Third, we explore some of the opportunities and challenges that mindfulness poses to managers and, especially, marketing.

2. Why now? Reasons for the rise in interest in mindfulness

There are three important reasons for the surge of interest in mindfulness. The first is that there is an ever-rising tsunami of information and stimuli that clamor for our attention. Indeed, Nobel laureate Herbert Simon (1971) argued almost half a century ago that in an information-rich world, attention becomes our scarcest resource. In this attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001), there are some ever-proliferating demands on our mental processes and designers of offerings from foods to TV series are becoming more and more adept at hooking our attention and, in the extreme, making us addicted to the stimuli they charge for (Cooper, 2017). Simply, we live in an age of digital distraction.

Thus, mindfulness—a type of attentional skill—has risen in prominence. It is offered as a solution to many of the cognitive ills that plague modern society. These include afflictions such as burn out, depression, anxiety, ADD, stress, and addiction. Moreover, there is substantial empirical evidence of its efficacy, not only for improving the health of the afflicted (e.g., Gotink et al., 2015) but also in enhancing the cognitive performance of the healthy in a range of settings from schools to business (e.g., Good et al., 2016; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Wang, Berthon, Pitt, & McCarthy, 2016).

The second reason is that, in our technological age, the costs of mindlessness are increasing. The misuse of carbon-based fuels, weapons of mass destruction, potent drugs, sophisticated machines, and the emotions that often drive this misuse are orders of magnitudes higher in size and distribution of impact than in our bucolic past, where the results of mindlessness were local and limited. Even the mindless sending of an emotional email or the mindless posting of a tweet or photo can reverberate quickly around the world. Simply, technology has magnified the contents of our minds to such an extent that we are being forced to confront this content as a matter of urgency—for both the planet and ourselves.

The third reason is that mindfulness appeals to the modern mind. Rationality and individualism have led to the questioning of established, dogmatic religions. Increasingly, proofless beliefs and adherence to handed-down codes are looked at with suspicion. Thus, mindfulness—an individual endeavor, relatively free of religious baggage, which emphasizes 'the now' rather than some promised future heaven or recoverable Lyonesse—has certain obvious appeal (Dunne, 2014).

3. What is mindfulness? A definition and types

As mentioned, the term mindfulness comes from the Pali word *sati* (the earliest documented teachings of Buddha were in Pali). *Sati* is a concept central to Buddhist practice. Indeed, one of the last instructions of Buddha was to “strive on with mindfulness” (Kornfield, 1977, p. 14).

Sati was originally translated, in 1881, as mindfulness by the British translator T.W. Rhys Davids, founder of the Pali Text society. Its etymological meaning is ‘to remember.’ A cursory reading of Buddhist canon will reveal two things about *sati*. First, mindfulness is presented as a practice rather than as a theory. Second, the term is used to describe a number of different practices: it is multidimensional in practice and meaning. The modalities of mindfulness include:

- Observation (how it is currently employed in Western psychology);
- Remembering (its original meaning);
- Discrimination (the act of recognizing, evaluating and selecting mental states); and
- Contemplation (the generation of insight into the working of the body-mind).

3.1. Mindfulness as observation

Originally, Davids (Gogerly, 1908) translated *sati* as mindfulness. Its modern, Western, mainstream interpretation can be traced back to the works of Nyanaponika Thera (1962), who defined mindfulness as bare attention; Bodhi (2011), however, suggested that lucid awareness might be closer to the original spirit of the term. This meaning was then expanded upon by Kornfield (1977, p. 13), who equated mindfulness with “direct observation” or “choiceless awareness.” He elaborated to specify three characteristics of this mode of attention: awareness or observation that is present-centered, non-evaluative, and non-reflective (Kornfield, 1977). This triumvirate has come to epitomize mainstream definitions of mindfulness (e.g., Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1994), which are now embodied in such practices as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). However useful this definition is, it is still but a partial understanding of the Buddhist notion of mindfulness.

While mindfulness’ Buddhist roots have been underplayed—so as to potentially free it from

historical baggage—a review of its various original meanings may be helpful in order to expand and enrich our understanding of this important concept. Indeed, as we shall see, the original Buddhist uses of the term mindfulness include the temporal, the evaluative, and the conceptual—all antithetical to the present-centered, nonevaluative, and non-reflective MBSR and MBCT use of the term (Dreyfus, 2011).

3.2. Mindfulness as remembering

As mentioned, mindfulness’s original meaning was temporal. Specifically, it was the act of remembering and pointedly remembering to return to the object one was attending to, whether this was a specific object of attention or a nondiscriminatory open awareness. From this perspective, mindfulness is the act of returning to an object. The alternate perspective views it as the inter-temporal faculty that monitors what one is doing so as to alert on deviation. In the classic Theravada tradition, the sutras often refer to mindfulness as an attentional gatekeeper (Gethin, 2011) that alerts and returns the mind to its object when it deviates or is distracted. This perspective on mindfulness was elaborated upon in Tibetan Buddhism, where mindfulness became “clear comprehension,” a meta-attentive ability to monitor and direct one’s mental states (Dreyfus, 2011, p. 50). In contrast to the bottom-up attention of bare attention or observation, in its remembrance mode, mindfulness becomes a top-down, directed attention (Dreyfus, 2011). This also equates well with Western views on attention. For example, William James (1890/1950, p. 421–422) stated: “voluntary attention . . . is a repetition of successive efforts to bring back the topic to mind.”

3.3. Mindfulness as discrimination

If mindfulness was initially about remembrance, as Buddhist thought evolved it took on an evaluative dimension. Indeed, mindfulness became synonymous with a discriminating function that went beyond awareness of what is arising in the present moment, to evaluating and selecting specific objects and states. This came to be known as wise judgment or right mindfulness (*samma sati*).

Mindfulness was seen as a faculty of mind that discriminated between wholesome and unwholesome states of mind. The terms wholesome or unwholesome should not be taken as moralist or normative, but rather an understanding of, and the ability to detect factors that contribute or detract from well-being and understanding (Olendzki,

2011). Mindfulness then becomes a way of detecting skillful or unskillful ways of working with and alleviating suffering (Stanley, 2013). Indeed, the whole thrust of Buddhism is the cultivation of insight so as to, in a direct and personal manner, see the chain of cause and effect that leads to suffering. This also implies that one may free oneself of the delusions (or habits of the unreflective mind) that result in suffering (Burton, 2017).

In the Pali Canon, this evolved into a distinct form of mindfulness: *appamāda* (Lomas, 2017). *Appamāda* means earnestness, vigilant care, diligence, and carefulness. Thus, mindfulness became awareness infused with ethical care, which in the Buddhist context meant right speech, right action, right morality, and right livelihood. A number of authors have pointed out that, in its incorporation into Western psychology, the ethical component to Buddhist mindfulness has been neglected (Rosenbaum, 2009; Stanley, 2012).

3.4. Mindfulness as contemplation

The fourth aspect of mindfulness that the Buddhist canon mentions is also a type of meta cognitive process. It is the ability of mindfulness to lead to insight. This is to go beyond what is presented, *prima facie*, in the experiential field to see deeper: to see into and see through. Here, mindfulness is a reflection on the contents of awareness so as to bring insight into the operations of the mind-body.

Bodhi (2011) argued that mindfulness is the beginning point of *sampajanna*, or clear comprehension. Mindfulness lays bare the contents of the

experiential field so that they may be investigated. Indeed, mindfulness and investigation lead to *panna*, or insight into the true nature of phenomena. As Dreyfus (2011) pointed out, in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, mindfulness involves the mind's ability to attend to and retain an arising experience so as to develop a clear understanding of the phenomenon. Mindfulness here is the cognitive ability to hold together the various aspects of the perceptual process so as to make sense of them. Furthermore, the Tibetan tradition developed the notion of a second type of mindfulness, wise mindfulness (see right mindfulness), which comprises mindfulness with clear comprehension that leads to insight (Dreyfus, 2011). Lomas (2017) said that there are at least three types of mindfulness: awareness of the present moment, awareness infused with evaluation, and awareness that builds on the previous two so as to lead to awareness infused with insight.

4. An integrative model

Having explored the different meanings of mindfulness found in the Buddhist tradition, we are now in a position to make sense of them. Once they are differentiated, it is possible to integrate them into an overall model to provide a more coherent and comprehensive picture. Figure 1 illustrates such a model. The delineating axes are experiential to conceptual and receptive-reflective to active-judgment. The former reflects on Bodhi's suggestion that mindfulness can lie on a spectrum from zero through light to heavy conceptualization

Figure 1. An integrative model of the types of mindfulness

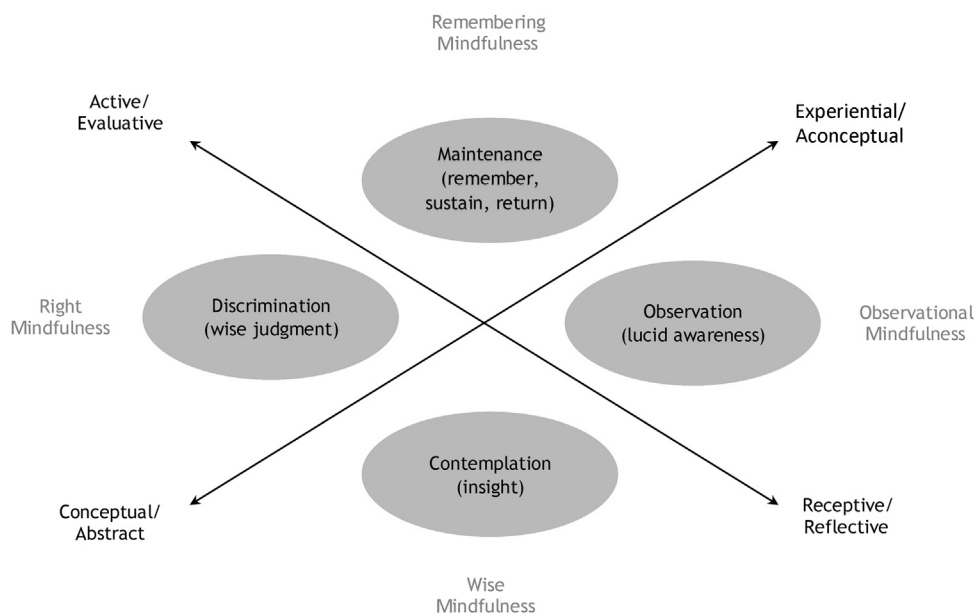
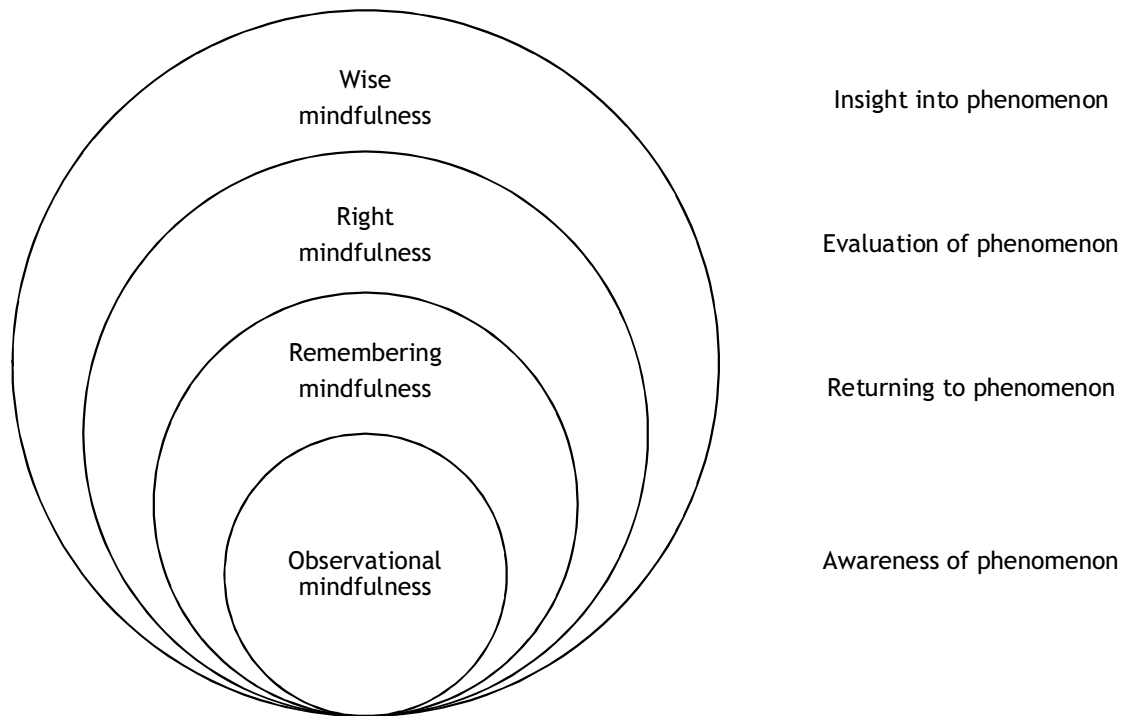


Figure 2. A nested model of the types of mindfulness



(Bodhi, 2011); the latter reflects the degree to which mindfulness is an act of evaluation rather than sight or insight (Gethin, 2011).

Defined by experiential focus and receptive awareness lies *observational mindfulness*, the popular, mainstream definition of mindfulness as bare attention or lucid awareness. With a focus on the experiential, but with an active, evaluative component lies *remembering mindfulness* whereby deviation from the object of attention is noticed and remedied. Again, with an active, evaluative component combined with a more abstract, conceptual mode lies discriminatory mindfulness, or as the Buddhist sutras call it *right mindfulness*. Finally, with an abstract conceptual mode combined with receptive and more specifically a reflect mode lies insightful contemplation, or what is known in Buddhism as *wise mindfulness*.

The relationship between these different types of mindfulness may be arranged as follows. The first mode of mindfulness is that of bare attention or lucid awareness; here, one is aware of the present moment or object of attention (observational mindfulness). However, attention wanders, so the second modality of mindfulness is the ability to monitor, detect, and return to the object of attention (remembering mindfulness). Once attention and returning have stabilized, right mindfulness is the ability to detect and evaluate mind states and discern wholesome from unwholesome states (right mindfulness). Finally, through the foundations of the other types of

mindfulness, comprehension emerges leading to insight into the true nature of things (wise mindfulness). This is depicted in Figure 2.

5. Challenges and opportunities of mindfulness for marketing

Tristan Harris, a former product manager at Google, recently launched a nonprofit called Time Well Spent, which is devoted to stopping “tech companies from hijacking our minds” (Thompson, 2017). Harris argues that the big platforms (e.g., Apple, Facebook, Google, YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram) devour our attention with their offerings. They appropriate the time that, on reflection, we might just wish we had never given.

Harris contends that companies are explicitly succeeding in hijacking our minds to make money (Cooper, 2017). Users of Facebook who merely wanted to see their friends’ holiday snaps and be alerted to upcoming birthdays are now exposed to countless ‘likes’ of mere acquaintances and ads at every third or fourth post that no amount of hiding or blocking will ever get rid of. Firms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram are also spending billions on cutting-edge psychological research to reveal how to get consumers hooked (in terms of attention and time spent) on their offerings (Eyal, 2014). Examples include gamification strategies such as Snapchat’s streaks, which manip-

ulates kids into sending messages back and forth with their contacts every single day as proof of friendship and engendering a fear of breaking the cycle. There are also the not-so-subtle nudges, such as YouTube's autoplay that automatically cues up the next video calculated (from the lots of information Google knows about the viewer) to keep you watching. Increasingly, our attention is not under our own control. Choices are made for us not necessarily in our interest but in the interest of social media companies and the advertisers they serve. In short, business models are designed to make us mindless.

Now before we get all hot and bothered about nasty companies commandeering our minds, it is worthwhile to reflect on how we got to where we are now. With the rise of the internet, the cost of duplicating and distributing almost any digital product fell to essentially zero. Physical CDs costing anywhere from \$10 to \$20, could be ripped and shared with millions of others in the blink of an eye. Suddenly valuable offerings, such as film, video, music, or text became almost worthless. Consumers got used to getting stuff for free, so business had to develop new models to generate revenues. They did, and a few firms—because of network effects—have become fabulously large and wealthy in the process. The model they developed is the advertising model we have come to know and mostly loathe. In the world of the well-known internet dictum: “If you're not paying for it, you are the product.” Here, the traditional offering-consumer relationship is inverted: Instead of consumers paying for products, they become the product. And the individual's attention has become the currency of the age.

This phenomenon goes a long way toward explaining the rise of interest in mindfulness amongst consumers. So why is it that companies are at the forefront of promoting mindfulness within their own organizations? It turns out that employees are just as distracted by social media as consumers, and firms see mindfulness practice as a way of enhancing employee's productivity and well-being. It is telling that Silicon Valley parents are far more rigorous in limiting or even eliminating their children's access to social media than parents in general (Fleming, 2015).

So, let us return to the model of mindfulness presented here. Our typology of mindfulness and nested model of modes of mindfulness allows three things:

1. A better understanding of the phenomenon of mindfulness. It expands the notion of mindfulness while identifying four distinct modalities.
2. Once differentiated, it allows firms to develop offerings to help particular modes of mindfulness.

3. The model allows marketers to rethink the ‘attention capturing’ and ‘more consumption is better’ business models and innovate so as to develop more mindful modes of business practice.

While present-centered, non-evaluative mindfulness is an excellent tool for disengaging from habitual and often negative patterns of discursive and affective reactivity, it has its limitations. For example, observational mindfulness may be of little help with addictive technology platforms and their associated content—being more immersed in a moment-by-moment Snapchat streak may even be counterproductive. Here, evaluative (right) mindfulness is needed, with the ability to discern the wholesome from unwholesome capturing of attention and thereby opening us up to the possibility of choice. Furthermore, mindfulness as remembering or returning to a particular activity or task in hand—reminding us to exercise, stand up from our desks, or take our medications—is particularly efficacious in a world of distraction. Finally, wise mindfulness or mindfulness that leads to insight is essential if we are to see how our minds are undermined by the technologies and content we interact with, and equally importantly, how the mind undermines itself.

6. Summary

It is important to stress that there is no one right view of mindfulness; sati is polysemous—it has many meanings. Buddhism is not monolithic; it has evolved and changed over time (Lopez, 2005). And with this evolution, the meaning of mindfulness has changed.

In this article, we elaborate on the types of mindfulness found in Buddhism and offer a typology of mindfulness that differentiates and integrates them. We also propose a nested model of modes of mindfulness and show how each mode can augment the previous mode. We also briefly explore the opportunities and challenges that mindfulness poses to firms. Opportunities to develop offerings that promote and enable different modes of mindfulness, and challenges to innovate to develop new business models that do not run on attention become readily apparent.

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