



Minding out?

Gelong Thubten explains the benefits of mindfulness in a business environment.

TEN SECOND SUMMARY

- 1 Mindfulness – an immediate awareness of our thoughts and feelings.
- 2 The practice does not conflict with religious beliefs.
- 3 Training the mind is as important as training the body.

The buzzword of the moment seems to be “mindfulness”. It’s on the radio, in the press, and there are courses, CDs and books; but what is it?

The NHS website quotes Professor Mark Williams, former director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre: “Mindfulness means knowing directly what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment.”

He continues: “It’s easy to stop noticing the world around us. It’s also easy to lose touch with the way our bodies are feeling and to end up living ‘in our heads’ – caught up in our thoughts without stopping to notice how those thoughts are driving our emotions and behaviour. An important part of mindfulness is reconnecting with our bodies and the sensations they experience. This means waking up to the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the present moment.”

To obtain a better insight into how mindfulness could help in a business environment I discussed the subject with an expert, Gelong Thubten.

Could you tell us a little about yourself and how you became involved with and interested in mindfulness?

My name is Gelong Thubten. Gelong means monk, so people call me Thubten. I was born and raised in England, and became a Buddhist monk at the age of 21. I was fortunate to train under some of the world’s most accomplished masters of meditation, and I wish to pass on some of what they have given me. I now spend most of my time studying and teaching Buddhist philosophy. One of the first companies I worked with was a huge management consultancy firm in London, which was a little daunting at first but soon became a very meaningful experience – I started to give monthly classes there. This was before the days when mindfulness was popular. I found it was possible to explain meditation in accessible, non-religious terms which would appeal to people in their busy workplace and have a very practical application. This took me into many other organisations and I am inspired to see how many people are eager to practice mindfulness meditation.



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Mindfulness seems to suddenly be a buzzword – why is that?

Of course meditation has been around for centuries, but I think the reason it has now become so popular is because of the use of the specific term “mindfulness”, which has a very obvious non-religious application. Another factor could be the huge amount of scientific research data proving the efficacy of these techniques. And these days, science is the new religion!

I understand that mindfulness is an integral part of Buddhist philosophy – does one need to be a Buddhist to benefit from this practice?

Absolutely not. Everybody can benefit, and it won’t conflict with any religious beliefs an individual may hold. Mindfulness simply helps us to examine our mind and transform our habits. And this is not the domain of any one religion over another, and furthermore it can be practiced by somebody who has no religious beliefs at all.

Can you provide a brief summary of what is meant by mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a system of mind training and meditation techniques that help us to focus the mind. This helps us to reduce stress and increase mental clarity. The methods also lead to a deeper level of compassion and awareness of one’s relationship to, and effect on, others. The more we understand our own mind, the greater chance we have to free ourselves from the root causes of suffering and to find genuine inner peace. We can also assist others in a wiser manner. The problem is that we are not usually in charge of our emotions and our reactions; in many ways, we are not the boss of our own mind. Mindfulness helps us to make actual choices in terms of how we think and feel.

How can mindfulness benefit someone in business, whether an entrepreneur or an employee?

As we know, stress is a major problem at work. Mindfulness is a very good method for learning to transform our reactions to stress. It also helps us to work with more energy, focus and efficiency. Another major benefit is that it leads to more positive mind states, which will help us to stay inspired and motivated. Further, one of the cornerstones of mindfulness training is the development of compassion and tolerance. This will vastly improve working relationships and the general atmosphere at the office as well as at home.

Workers seem to be increasingly “time poor” and under pressure. Will they have to make time to benefit from mindfulness at work?

I find it useful to teach methods that people can apply in their daily lives: at their desks, in meetings, while walking, traveling and while doing things. It is all about generating awareness and focusing on the present moment.

Of course, we need to be able to think about the past and the future, but we need to do that with more choice, and be less controlled by random, distracted thinking. One can then start to learn simple techniques that could take about 15 to 20 minutes a day. Life is incredibly busy, but we all need to make a little time to give ourselves peace and more mental freedom. We are aware of the need to exercise the body and eat the right food; but what about mental fitness training and nutrition for the mind? If it is well explained, people start to see the importance of making time to improve their state of mind. After all, the mind is everything: it is the filter through which we experience our life.

Will mindfulness make someone more efficient at work?

Yes. As our stress levels reduce and our mental focus increases, we can work with more precision, while becoming less tired and making fewer mistakes. And as our mind becomes more positive, our relationship with our work is bound to improve.

Will mindfulness make someone happier?

The main thing to realise is that happiness is a choice. It does not need to depend so much on external things; it is a state of mind. Mindfulness helps us to train our mind to be more positive.

Does mindfulness require a particular mindset in the first place? For example people are often described as being “type A” (ambitious, aggressive, outgoing) or “type B” (more relaxed); can both benefit?

Everyone can benefit because we are going beyond the personality and into the deeper part of our mind, the area of pure awareness.

Is there any concern that the popularisation of mindfulness will result in a “watering down” of its fundamental principles and detract from it?

Possibly, if the people teaching it are not well trained. It is essential that mindfulness teachers do a great deal of high-quality, thorough, training and practice.

Can any particular problems be anticipated when implementing a mindfulness programme or lessons in a business organisation? For example, is there a fundamental conflict between the business need to make a profit and mindfulness principles – if so, how might these be resolved?

There is nothing wrong with having a good career, being ambitious and making profit. But if those things are the “be all and end all” for us, our life becomes incredibly frustrating, and eventually we might start to think “yes, but what’s this all for?” We need to balance our inner and outer world, and to learn that the greatest wealth is to have a happy mind. Then, if one wants to be successful at work, of course that success will come. But the main thing is to have a greater sense of compassion for ourselves and others, so that our lives start to have a deeper sense of meaning.

Conclusion

Mindfulness cannot, by itself be a panacea for all of life’s problems, but it should help those in a stressful environment. The nature of our business is to look at what has happened and then plan for what is to come. In accountancy, we are doing this for our clients, not just for ourselves. We can’t stop those concerns, but mindfulness can perhaps help us to concentrate on addressing the present rather than worrying unduly about the past and the future.

Mindfulness helps us understand our own minds better, so that we can find genuine inner peace and happiness, and so that we can connect with others in a more authentic and compassionate manner.



Gelong Thubten is of Anglo Indian descent and was among the first westerners brought up in a Buddhist family. He studied English Literature at Oxford, and became a Buddhist monk 23 years ago. He is based at Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery in Scotland. Thubten served as personal assistant to Choje Akong Tulku Rinpoche for many years, and also teaches Buddhism, meditation and mindfulness internationally. He is a Trustee of ROKPA International, a humanitarian aid charity, and a Director of Samye Foundation Wales and Samye Yorkshire, UK. Thubten, who has spent over five years in intensive meditation retreats, specialises in teaching mindfulness in secular situations such as businesses, hospitals, schools, prisons and addiction counselling centres. He has worked with clients such as the NHS, Google, HSBC, Morrisons, Clifford Chance and Linklaters. He has lectured on Buddhism and meditation at the universities of Oxford, Helsinki and Cardiff. Thubten can be contacted by email at: thubten@samye.org Visit: www.mindfulness.samye.org Photo by Tony Bartholomew.