

Why Mindfulness Took the World by Storm

Keynote Speech by Ven. Aggacitta Mahāthera

An edited transcript of a YouTube video

[Why Mindfulness Took the World by Storm](#)

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Introduction

I'm honoured for the opportunity to deliver a keynote address for this important event. First of all I want to congratulate the organisers for their time and effort in trying to spread the good news that the practice of mindfulness can positively transform your mind and life. In my speech I will use a three-pronged approach to investigate the mindfulness phenomena, or as Time Magazine puts it, "The Mindful Revolution"—the How, the What and the Why. How mindfulness is sweeping the world, What actually is mindfulness and Why mindfulness is so universally applicable and efficacious. Let me start off with the How.

1 How

From the list of topics for this conference we can already see that mindfulness is applicable to healthcare, education and the workplace. But this is only the tip of the iceberg because the application of mindfulness is very pervasive and it covers many other areas as well, such as sports, the arts, politics and even the military. In fact you just name it and mindfulness can still find a place there. Although mindfulness is believed to be initially confined to the spiritual domain it is now abundantly clear that it is equally applicable in practically all worldly human activities.

2 What

But what actually is mindfulness?

2.1 Current Understanding

Our current understanding of mindfulness is present moment awareness. Or more precisely it is “paying attention in an open, non-judgmental way to what is happening here and now”. When I first started studying the Pāḷi scriptures as a monk more than 40 years ago I was puzzled why mindfulness was understood this way because the Pāḷi term from which it is translated has a different or, you could even say, opposite meaning as we shall see later. Now Pāḷi is an ancient Indian dialect, in the same family as Sanskrit and you could perhaps compare the relation between Pāḷi and Sanskrit with Cantonese and Mandarin or Kelantanese and Bahasa Melayu. Pāḷi is also the language in which our early Buddhist scriptures are preserved. After many years of research I finally came to terms with this apparent contradiction, so today I’m happy to share my findings with you.

2.2 Original Meaning

First I want to bring your attention to the original meaning of mindfulness. In ancient India, mindfulness was already acknowledged to be an essential ingredient for worldly success. Evidence for this can be found in a conversation between a brahmin and the Buddha, more than two thousand five hundred years ago. This is recorded in our Pāḷi scriptures and if you are familiar with them, it can be found in the *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, The Book of Fours, Sutta No. 35 called Vassakāra Sutta.

Vassakāra was a Brahmin and the chief minister of the kingdom of Magadha which was then ruled by King Ajātasattu, the son of King Bimbisāra. One day he approached the Buddha and declared that in his personal opinion, a great person with great wisdom has four qualities. What are they? He must be

1. well informed
2. intelligent
3. mindful
4. skillful, hard-working and quick-witted in the execution and management of his affairs.

The fourth quality seems quite obvious but the first three needs a bit of explanation. In Vassakāra’s own words the first quality is “one who has heard much”. In ancient India the primary source of information was through speech so in order to be well-informed you have to listen to what people say. Nowadays of course, our sources of information are more varied and so I’ve translated it as *well-informed* in keeping with our modern circumstances.

For the second quality Vassakāra used the words “one who understands the meaning of what is said”. Well, you might have heard a lot but if you don’t understand what people say that wouldn’t count as a quality for great wisdom. And now with the plethora of information available from the internet, it is even more important for one to have the intelligence to be able to understand what one is accessing from the internet. Further we need to have the discretion to distinguish fact from fiction, real information from misinformation or disinformation and what is relevant from what is not.

Talking about relevance, the third quality is what is most relevant for us because Vassakāra defined a mindful person as “one who can remember and repeatedly recall even things that were done and said long ago”. This may sound a bit strange to you because we now understand mindfulness to be present moment awareness but Vassakāra understood mindfulness as remembrance which is awareness of the past. We should bear in mind that Vassakāra was a brahmin and chief minister of Magadha so he wasn’t a Buddhist, nor was he a spiritual practitioner, and yet his definition of mindfulness as “remembrance and repeated recall of things that were done and said long ago” was also used by the Buddha frequently in several suttas. So we can see very clearly that in ancient India mindfulness was understood as remembrance or awareness of the past. In fact in the whole of the Pāḷi language in which our scriptures are preserved there is only one single word for “to remember” and that is *sarati* and its noun is *sati* which should be remembrance or awareness of the past. But now we translate *sati* as mindfulness and understand it as “present moment awareness”.

2.3 The Range of Mindfulness

So how can we reconcile this apparent contradiction? In order for us to do so I need to introduce you to the range or scope of mindfulness. Through my many years of research studying the Pāḷi scriptures, listening to lectures given by meditation masters, reading the papers of modern Pāḷi scholars, scrutinising the experiences shared by meditators and through my own personal experience, I have come to the conclusion that there are four very important aspects of mindfulness that are universally applicable whether for worldly or spiritual pursuits.

I call them the four Rs and all of them are based on the premise that mindfulness is awareness of the past. And what are these four?

1. Remember
2. Recollect
3. Remind

4. Retrospect.

Let me explain. You Remember the information that you are currently collecting so that later on you will be able to Recollect it and then Remind yourself to apply it wherever and whenever necessary. I use the word “Retrospect” in a very literal sense because it is made up of two Latin words “retro” and “spect”. “Retro” means “back” and “spect” means “look”, so “retrospect” literally means look back. So I use it in this way—to retrospect is to look back at what had happened.

Let me illustrate with some graphic examples. Let’s say a student is studying for her exams. The textbook is open in front of her and she cannot afford to read the textbook as she would the newspapers or a magazine by flipping through pages to look for things that are interesting. On the contrary she has to make a deliberate effort to Remember or memorise the salient points of the subject so that later when she sits for the exam she will be able to Recollect what she had remembered or memorised, and answer the exam questions. Many subjects require students to remember or memorise certain principles or formulas so the student has to Remind herself to apply these principles or formulas wherever necessary.

Let’s say the student is in the process of studying for the exams and then she gets bored. The thought arises of wanting to entertain herself but she manages to catch this thought and she reminds herself, “Hey wait a minute, I can’t afford to be distracted right now. I’d better focus on my studies otherwise if I don’t do well in my exams, my parents are going to skin me alive,” or “I’ll become the laughing stock of my class,” or whatever. And so because she managed to catch the thought and reminded herself, she was able to curtail it and get back to her studies.

So this is Retrospecting, looking back at what had happened in the mind because it was an urge, an intention of wanting to entertain itself perhaps by looking for an interesting video on YouTube or chatting online with a friend. If she had not retrospected she would have impulsively followed that urge, that intention, got distracted and that would have affected her performance in the examination.

Although the example I gave you of Retrospect here is of the immediate past, retrospect is by no means limited to just the immediate past. It can go further back. For example a student might wake up very late one day and he rushes to the lecture hall and while he’s there he wonders whether he had locked the door when he left his room. So at that time he would have to recall the sequence of events before and after he left the room in order to ascertain whether he actually did lock it. That is also retrospecting. But it’s not the immediate past, it’s something that happened much earlier. There is actually no limit to this, it can go back further and further to your early childhood or even to past lives.

2.3.1 Difference Between Recollect and Retrospect

At this point you might ask: “What’s the difference between recollect and retrospect?” You Recollect something which you deliberately remembered or memorised but you Retrospect something which you didn’t. So that’s the very simple difference. Retrospection can go back to past lives even, because those incidents that you retrospected may not necessarily be those that you had intentionally or deliberately memorised.

2.3.2 Difference Between Deliberate and Spontaneous Memory

Another thing that I want to bring your attention to is two types of memory: spontaneous memory and deliberate memory. Spontaneous memory does not involve intention, for example the spontaneous recognition of a face or names. But deliberate memory is involved with intention. For example when you look at somebody and you think, “This guy looks familiar,” and yet you can’t remember his name or when you had met him, and you try to recall. That is deliberate memory. All the four Rs come under this category of deliberate memory.

2.3.3 How Past Is the Past

Now we see that all these four Rs, as I said at the onset, are connected with the past. They are all awareness of the past but the question is, how past is the past? How far from the present must an event have occurred to be regarded as past?

Of course there won’t be any doubt that something that happened many aeons ago or many lifetimes ago is past, or even many years, weeks, months or days ago. But as we get nearer and nearer to the present: hours, minutes, seconds, milliseconds ago, nanoseconds ago ... then we realise that actually there is a very thin ephemeral line between the past and the future which we call the present. It is so elusive that the moment I say “present,” it’s gone, it’s already passed. So I want you to bear this in mind because the range or the scope of mindfulness is the range of the past. This will help us to reconcile the apparent contradiction between awareness of the past and present moment awareness.

2.3.4 Mindfulness Is Amoral

Now that we have an overview of the scope of mindfulness in terms of the four Rs, I want to ask you two questions:

First, do you think that there’s anything exclusively religious or spiritual about mindfulness? The answer is “No”, am I right? All the examples I gave you are worldly. But of course it can also be applied to spiritual situations. Let’s say you

want to learn meditation from somebody, or how about you learning meditation from me. Let's do it now just for a few seconds. Listen carefully to my instructions.

Sit with the back straight. Relax, don't close your eyes. Open your eyes but don't look at the screen. Look beyond the screen, look beyond the walls in your room so that everything in front of your eyes becomes de-focused. You can still see colours and shapes but you can't see their features or details.

You then ask yourself: "If the mind is not thinking, ruminating, daydreaming, planning, imagining, what can the mind be aware of happening at the senses?"

Or you could keep on repeating in your mind every now and then, "What's the mind aware of?" As you do that then you begin to see that your consciousness widens. Rather than just focusing on what I'm saying, now you're beginning to feel your senses in a more pervasive way.

Okay that's the end of our experiment.

While you were trying to follow my instructions, were you applying the four R's? I hope I have demonstrated that you were. This is because you were listening intensely to what I said and you were trying to remember my instructions so that you could recollect them and remind yourself to follow instructions. You also had to look back at the mind in retrospect to make sure that the mind was trying to meditate and not indulging in its favourite past-times of rumination, daydreaming, fantasising and planning for the future.

Now we can say that mindfulness is ethically neutral. There is nothing religious or even spiritual about mindfulness. Rather, its ethical quality can only be determined by the motivation behind its activation. Perhaps you have grand plans of wanting to create harmony and peace among the peoples of the world and you make use of the four Rs to achieve your goal. Then you would agree that that's something very wholesome. On the other hand if you want to divide people, cause disharmony among peoples of different nations so that you can maintain hegemony, that is unwholesome. So mindfulness is ethically neutral and its ethical nature can only be determined by the motivation behind it.

2.3.5 Reconciliation

Now we move on to the second question, which is: Among these four Rs of mindfulness, where do you think our current idea of mindfulness as present moment awareness fits in? I would say that it fits in the last R which is Retrospect. In the example that I gave you of the student who was studying and who caught her intention of wanting to entertain herself, she was actually aware of that intention which was in the immediate past. So the so-called present moment awareness is actually awareness of the immediate past. Also, because we saw that

the range of mindfulness is the past—stretching from the immediate past to the infinite past—mindfulness can also mean the so-called present moment awareness.

Hence the definition of mindfulness as present moment awareness is not wrong but it is incomplete because it's only a tiny fraction of the scope of mindfulness. Nonetheless even by the promotion of this tiny aspect of mindfulness, mindfulness can still become so universally applicable, efficacious and acceptable regardless of race, religion, gender, age or occupation.

3 Why

But why? What's the secret behind this phenomenal success? This will bring us to our next section. In order for us to unravel this mystery you need to understand one very important concept which I call the 5-6-1 feature of the six senses.

3.1 5-6-1 Feature of the Six Senses

5 refers to the five senses, 6 to the sixth sense, which is the mind, and 1 to the object that the mind can be conscious of.

3.1.1 *The 5 Senses*

The five senses or the five sense faculties are very specialised. Each sense faculty can only take or be conscious of its respective sense object. The eyes can only see colours. The eyes can't hear, smell, taste nor feel sensations like pain, hardness and softness. But wait a minute! The eyes can't feel—is this correct? Well you might agree to the first three but not to the fourth one because you could say, "My eyes can smart, feel dry, uncomfortable, pain or strain. So why do you say that the eyes cannot feel sensations?"

When I use the word "sense" or "sense faculty" in this context, I am not referring to the whole sense organ. For example when I say the "eyes" I am not referring to the whole eyeball but only to that sensitive part of the eyeball that can receive light frequency within a certain range. If you know biology you will know that what I'm referring to are the rods and the cones in the eyes. So the rest of the eyeball apart from the rods and cones actually belong to the body sense faculty. That is why the eyes can feel pain and sensations such as discomfort and dryness.

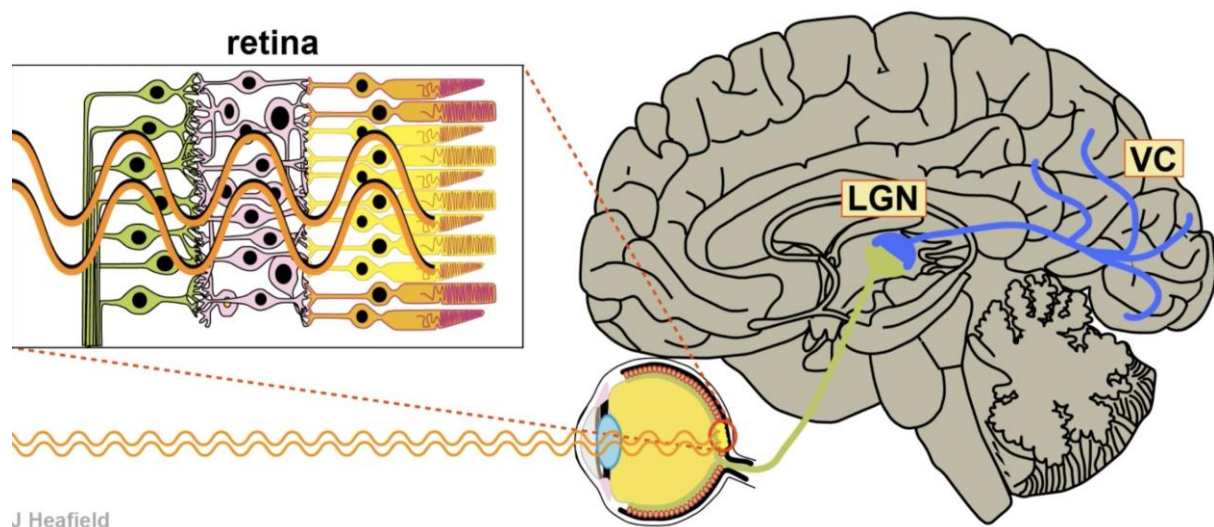
Not only are all these five senses very specialised in that they can only be conscious of their specific sense objects, but also all their sense objects must be in the present moment. Whatever you saw in a video last night, if it is not open in front of you right now, your eyes can't see it. Whatever food you tasted before you

joined this conference, if that food is not in your tongue, you cannot taste it. The object must be right here right now to be sensed.

3.1.2 The 6th Sense

However the mind is different. The mind can take objects of the past, present, future and beyond. The mind can take all the objects of the five senses, and also objects which the five senses cannot take, for example concepts and ideas. These are imperceptible by the five senses. From the study of biology you will know that as long as the mind is dependent on the five senses to perceive the environment, it is never in the actual present moment, but always in the past although it is only a few milliseconds or even nanoseconds away.

Now take a look at this diagram. This is an animated gif used for school children in the UK to teach them about visual perception.



You see the light rays hit the eyeball and go through to hit the retina. In the retina you have all these rods and cones and once they are stimulated they will send a signal through the nerves to the brain. There the brain will start to fire neurons so that different parts of the brain can collaborate to make sense out of that raw data received from the eyes. That takes quite some time, it might just be a few milliseconds ago or a nanosecond ago but still when you talk about the micro level it is not in the present.

As long as the mind is dependent on the five senses, it is always behind time. It is interpreting the information that has been relayed from the sense faculties to the brain. So when can the mind be actually aware of present objects? When the mind is thinking about past events, i.e. ruminating, it is not aware of present sense objects, but of concepts; nonetheless it's still thinking about the past. However, the

mind can build concepts based on past experiences into new ones and one could say that happens in the present moment. Actually, only when the mind is independent of the five senses can it take present objects. I can give you two examples of that.

The first is of a meditator. Say there is a talented meditator who goes to a retreat centre to meditate for maybe a week or so and she had a very good meditation going. Her mind was very peaceful and calm and focused. In the course of her meditation, the thought arose in her of wondering what her son was doing at home: "Is he doing his homework or is he playing computer games or something else?" Because her mind was well composed in a meditative state, the moment she thought about this, a vision appeared in her mind's eye. She could see her son playing computer games in his room and with the clock hanging on the wall, she could see the time very clearly. But the moment she saw that she became upset or disappointed and because of that she lost her composure and the vision just disappeared. Later on after she left the retreat and went back home she verified with her son that this was exactly what happened at that particular time.

So this is an occasion of how the mind can take present objects because it is independent of the five senses. The five senses were in the meditation centre but the mind was able to take objects that were happening in another place at home. But I must warn you not to harbour false expectations that if you meditate you are going to get the same ability because this is something very rare and that's why at the onset I said a "talented" meditator. It's akin to talented athletes, talented musicians and talented artists who don't need any special tuition, but can just perform intuitively by themselves. Similarly, there are some meditators who are like that. But this is quite a rare ability so don't think that everyone can do that.

Now moving on to the next example. I'm sure many of you have heard of near-death experiences where patients were declared clinically dead or even brain dead, maybe for a few minutes, a few hours or even a few days sometimes, who then later came back to life. They were resuscitated somehow and they claimed that during the period when they were supposed to be dead they were very much alive. Some say that they were up on the ceiling looking down at the surgeons and the emergency team trying frantically to save them, to resuscitate them. Some could even hear the conversations that were going on among the team members; some could describe in detail the procedures that were being executed at the time which normal lay people would not be able to understand or even remember. In more rare cases some of them could even read the minds of the emergency team as they tried to resuscitate the body.

Here again you can see that mental activity can still happen when all the five senses are inactive, although neuroscientists believe that the brain is the mind. Such cases however show you that it is not so. Although there can be a correlation between mental activity and neural activity, it is not always the case. The mind can still function independent of the brain in special circumstances.

Now let's talk about the future. The human mind has the potential to be conscious of events that will happen in the future but for the majority of people this potential has not been realised because we are still bogged down by the objects of the five senses and by our intellect. However there are some people who are naturally talented to have extra sensory perception whereby they can have premonitions of what will happen in the future. They can sometimes see visions of that future event in their mind's eye or sometimes they can just have a feeling that such an event will occur. Then there are also very highly attained yogis who can have the ability to see into the future.

I said that the mind can also be aware of things beyond the past, present and future. This refers to the awakening experience of people who are enlightened. There is something beyond the five senses and beyond time.

3.1.3 Normally the Mind Can Only Be Conscious of One Object at a Time

The mind, although it's so powerful, for normal people can only take one object at a time. I say normal people because there are some very highly attained yogis especially from India and Tibet who claim that when they reach a certain meditative state they can be conscious of things happening all at once in the past, present and future. But they are not abnormal, in fact they are super normal people.

For normal people, the mind can only take one object at a time. Then you might object and say: "Well I can multitask; I can do many things all at once. For example, now I'm sitting here looking at you, listening and understanding. Isn't that multitasking and doing many things at the same time and being aware of many things all at once?" Well neuroscientists have conducted experiments to investigate this. First of all they wire the brains of their subjects and connect them to computers to monitor their brain activity while the subject is being put to a multitasking job. Their findings show that the brain can only do one thing at a time. When the subject changes from one task to another different task then a different part of the brain is being stimulated. So multitasking is an illusion, not the real thing. It is more apparent than real. In fact some scientists believe that multitasking is bad for your brain because it was not designed for that. But again, remember that the brain is

not the mind, although there can be a correlation between mental activity and brain activity.

3.1.4 Conclusions Based on Understanding 5-6-1

So now that we understand this 5-6-1 feature of the 6 senses, we can draw two very significant conclusions. The first conclusion is that the actual present moment awareness can only happen in the five senses, not in the mind. As long as the mind is still dependent on the five senses, the mind is always in the immediate past. The second conclusion is that if we anchor the mind to the five senses then it can be extracted from irrelevant unproductive mental activity.

The first conclusion is pretty simple to understand. The second one might need a little bit of explanation if you cannot understand the rationale. Since the mind can only take one object at the time, if you anchor it to the five senses which are always in the present moment then the mind will be so busy in the immediate past that it wouldn't have the time to go beyond that. You wouldn't have the time to go back to the intermediate past or the distant past and make projections of what might happen or might not happen in the future. But this needs training. When the mind has been trained to continually anchor itself to the five senses when it is not engaged in any productive mental activity, then it will generate a very beneficial state of mind which I call composure.

3.2 Composure

Composure is the ability of the mind to pay attention without being distracted by extraneous, unproductive, irrelevant thoughts, feelings and perceptions. So you see: because we are anchoring the mind to the five senses (which are always in the present moment), people say in conventional language that this is the present moment awareness (of staying with the senses of physical activities) that brings about composure. Composure is a very beneficial state of mind. When you reach that state it becomes very peaceful because you are no longer disturbed by extraneous, irrelevant, unproductive thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

In Pāṭi it's called "samādhi". Most people translate this as "concentration", but I prefer to use the word "composure" because "concentration" can have some misleading connotations. This beneficial state of mind in turn will bring about clarity of mind and that clarity of mind will improve the efficiency of whatever you are doing. It doesn't matter what you are doing; regardless of gender, age or occupation, if you practise this so-called present moment awareness, your mind will

become composed. Because it's composed, you have clarity of mind and that will improve your efficiency.

3.3 The Jackpot

So that is the jackpot. That is why mindfulness took the world by storm. Even by the promotion of a tiny aspect of mindfulness, mindfulness can still be so universally applicable, efficacious and acceptable.

In fact the easiest way to get composure is by engaging yourself in some demanding physical activity. Now I want you to watch and listen to this video carefully. (*Video of a woman rock climbing and the VO saying*)

“Being in the moment is what attracts me to it. It's very not stressful. Being in the moment ... there's nothing else. There's no tomorrow, there's no yesterday, you're just like right in the moment.”

Yes, she's right in the moment, not feeling stressed. What she is doing may be blood chilling to you but to her it is not stressful. It's not stressful because there's nothing from the past or the future that you need to worry about. You need to be just in the present moment. Look at this climber, he is rock climbing and he cannot afford to think of the past or worry about the future. Instead he has to be very careful with every movement that he makes, every rock that he grabs, every rock that he puts his foot on he must be sure that it's stable and it won't fall off, or it's not slippery. So by doing this then the mind automatically becomes composed.

If rock climbing is too blood chilling for you, perhaps you can try something that is less challenging, for example try to climb the Mulu Pinnacles. If you find that too challenging perhaps you can do something more down to earth like stream hiking.

I conduct mindful hiking retreats and there are some participants who have done the normal sit-walk meditation retreats before where you go to a retreat centre and sit and walk and sit and walk the whole day. They say that when you go mindful hiking, especially when you are negotiating challenging terrain, slippery and steep, then you are immediately composed, and that beats doing a normal sit-walk retreat. Because for the first few days of a sit-walk retreat, your mind will have a lot of baggage and the mind will either be very restless or very sleepy. But for a mindful hiking retreat, in the first hike of the day of the whole retreat, you are already very alert, alive, mindful and composed.

So if you are thinking of wanting to compose your mind, choose a physical activity which you can do. Stream hiking is a very interesting mindful activity because the rocks can be slippery or they can be loose. The rock can be huge making you think that it's stable, but if you put your weight on it you might just topple over and fall

into the water. You don't only get drenched but you might hurt yourself because you don't know how deep the water is, or what's underneath. If you can't go stream hiking, go swimming. If you can't swim, go join a fitness activity. A fitness activity in the gym will also keep your mind focused on the five senses. If you can't do that then you should do something very simple that everyone can do which is go for a jog or a walk in the park.

3.3.1 ADA Anchor

Since composure is so important, I will give you a bonus. I've already answered the question why mindfulness took the world by storm and now I want to give you a bonus. I have created an acronym on how to compose the mind, because composure is so important. The acronym is called ADA Anchor. In Malay language, ADA means "have" and "anchor" is "anchor" in English.

- **A** = Accept whatever happens as a product of causes and conditions
- **D** = Don't reject or follow it
- **A** = Abandon it
- **Anchor** the mind to one object or to the 5 senses.

So this first "A" represents two important points. The first is that you must have the right attitude and the second is that it is based on the acceptance of the fact that whatever happens is a product of causes and conditions.

It's already well established in the scientific community that all the physical things in this world are products of causes and conditions. But the mental world is different because it is not within the domain of the scientific community although they are trying to do so now through neuroscience by conducting experiments with meditators. But anyway this first "A" is very important because if you don't have this quality of acceptance you will not be able to go to the second one which is "D". Whatever happens to you, if it's something you don't like, don't reject it. If it's something you like, don't follow it. If it's something you don't like and you reject it, that will cause your mind to be agitated. If it's something you like and you follow it then you get lost in it, you get distracted.

So you don't reject or follow it, but just abandon or ignore it, then you come back to your senses. Be aware of what's happening to your senses. You can be seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, it could be sitting, being aware of your body. For example right now you're looking at me, you're looking at the screen but at the same time you can also be aware of the sense of being seated can't you? You can be aware of your body touching your seat, your skin touching your clothing, the air around you. You can hear sounds. When you're eating, all the six senses are being stimulated.

For a start, those of you who want to quickly compose your mind, do this; and as I said earlier, try to choose a challenging physical activity that is suitable for you. Go for a swim, go for a jog, go for a game, go to the gym, whatever. This will automatically compose your mind because the mind can only take one object at a time when it's anchored to the five senses, which is always in the present moment. Then you will have clarity of mind and improve your efficiency in whatever you will do after that.

3.3.2 Bonus

After you have mastered this then you can go on to the next step which is a bit more challenging—we add an extra element to the “D”. Instead of just don't reject and don't follow, we also don't ignore it. In the first one it was just ignored. So if you don't ignore it, what do you do? You acknowledge it, you know what it is—Is it anger? Is it frustration? Is it resentment? Is it a judgmental comment on someone or myself? Is it the feeling of low self-esteem? Or whatever. You notice it, acknowledge it and then you let it go by coming back to your five senses.

Now this is very important because if you don't acknowledge and let it go, then chances are you will get caught in those especially negative thoughts and then create more suffering for yourself. The advantage of the second step is that it inclines or prepares your mind to understand cause and effect—how your thoughts, reactions, responses, opinions, beliefs, whatever, whatever happens in your mind, are products of causes and conditions. Present circumstances are causes and past conditions are for example, the way your parents brought you up, your environment, your peers, social media, whatever. All these things actually combine to influence your mind to have a certain idea, thought, perception, feeling and so forth.

4 Summary

Okay so let me summarise before I close my talk. I started off by saying that I will take a three-pronged approach in the investigation of the mindfulness phenomena and this is the How, the What and Why—of How mindfulness is sweeping through the world; What actually is mindfulness; Why mindfulness is so universally applicable.

We saw that the application of mindfulness is so pervasive it can cover practically anything in this world.

Then we went on to look at the What of mindfulness, what actually is mindfulness. We compared the original meaning of mindfulness as remembrance or awareness of the past, to our current understanding of it as present moment

awareness and we try to reconcile that by first of all understanding the scope of mindfulness in terms of the four Rs: Remember, Recollect, Remind, Retrospect.

We saw that mindfulness is ethically neutral, nothing exclusively religious or spiritual about it. And this apparent contradiction between awareness of the past and present moment awareness can be reconciled because the so-called present moment awareness is actually awareness of an immediate past object and can come under the fourth R. But we still haven't got to the root of the problem, which is why mindfulness took the world by storm, so we had to go on to the 5-6-1 feature of the six senses to understand how the six senses work.

Then we came to two very important conclusions:

- the actual present moment awareness is only possible at the five senses
- you can actually extract the mind from unproductive irrelevant mental activity by anchoring it to the five senses because the five senses are always in the present moment.

That's why this so-called present moment awareness leads to composure which is a very beneficial state of mind. It brings a lot of peace and clarity of mind and improves the efficiency of whatever you are doing. So this is how or why mindfulness took the world by storm even though only a very small fraction of the scope of mindfulness has been promoted.

I should end the talk here and I think that we have a few minutes of Q&A if you need any clarifications.

5 Q&A

The first question is comes from Theresa in New Zealand:

Q1: When seeking to illuminate right mindfulness, is it necessary to do so within the context of right view? For example recognising the truth of the four noble truths?

A1: My speech is oriented towards the secular application of mindfulness and not in a religious sense. But actually mindfulness can be looked at from three aspects: right mindfulness, wrong mindfulness and ordinary mindfulness. Right and wrong mindfulness are related to spiritual practice leading to liberation. If you follow a spiritual practice that will not lead to real liberation then it's wrong mindfulness. But if mindfulness is not applied to any spiritual practice but for everyday use like what the Brahmin Vassakāra declared, it can still be an essential ingredient for worldly success. Hope that answers the question.

The next question comes from Chong in Malaysia.

Q2: I wonder if retrospect is the only R that could happen unintentionally and could enhance our wisdom if we work on retrospect training.

A2: I guess you typed this question before you finished seeing my slides because when I made a distinction between spontaneous memory and deliberate memory I already said that all the four Rs of mindfulness belong to the category of deliberate memory.

The next question is from Ka Hi Gun

Q3: Does anchoring to the five senses mean paying attention to what the five senses perceive?

A3: Well initially yes. You pay attention to the objects of the five senses but that is only for beginners. Later on instead of paying attention to the objects of the five senses we pay attention to the experience of sense perception. The experience of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling sensations with the body rather than focusing on the objects of what the eye sees, or a particular sound that the ear hears.

Let's move on to the next question. Sandra is asking this question:

Q4: Can we consider "composure" similar to the Buddhist concept of mindfulness and vigilant mind?

A4: In the Buddhist concept, composure is usually or mostly translated as concentration, samādhi, not mindfulness.

The next question comes from Han Yang:

Q5: Can I say, in a mindfulness approach for mental health, once you master the skill of being present—using the ADA Anchor concept that you shared—is it always encouraged to revisit a past event and let it go?

A5: Well that's possible but there's another better way of doing it, which is to rely on intuitive wisdom, rather than intellectual rationalising. It really depends on whether you have the time to spare in order to get that intuitive wisdom. I can share with you an experience of one of my students.

She's someone from Europe. She is an ardent practitioner and she also does some hiking. It seems that she's quite good at hiking and when she goes on a hike with people she would usually reach the top first, but would be the last to come down because she said that there's this uneasy feeling of being very self-conscious when she comes down—not because she's clumsy because she's quite agile. So she just couldn't figure out why she would always be the first to get up to the top

and yet the last to come down, feeling very self-conscious. She wrote me an email and the moment I read it I had already sort of known the answer.

I replied, "If you had really been mindful of what you were doing when you climbed down the hill, such thoughts would not have arisen. It is probably because there is some childhood trauma that you have, that's buried in the subconscious and which you haven't uncovered, that is influencing that spontaneous response." Since she was a practitioner, when she read my email for the first time it rang a bell in her mind. And then she read it the second time and when she reached that sentence again suddenly she had a vision of what happened to her in her childhood.

Now she's around maybe early 40s so she said that when she was about 12 years old she rolled down the slope and got trapped under the family's Citroen car, under the undercarriage. Standing nearby was her cousin who jeered and made fun of her and that stuck in the subconscious for so long until now. But then when she had that vision of that past incident, of that past trauma, it seemed as though a huge burden had fallen off her shoulders. Then she wrote, "Well let's see next time when I go hiking again if this thing has really been completely resolved." Later she emailed me again and said, "Yes, indeed it has."

This has happened to many of my yogis before. What I would encourage them to do is to practise ADA Anchor, get the mind composed and go on to the second step of looking at things in terms of causes and conditions. Then when the mind is really very composed they can pose the question of that issue, "Why do I have this phobia for this thing, or this sort of reaction for inexplicable reasons?" They just pose that question and don't try to investigate it intellectually. They just pose the question, put it aside and come back to ADA Anchor and then eventually, not necessarily immediately, perhaps later on in the day, the answer will just pop up and their problem is resolved.