

A Novel Approach to Mindfulness (Controlling One's Mental Territory)

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Abstract: Mindfulness is a novel concept falling within the field of cognitive psychology. This practical ability is based on employing special cognitive skills which are aimed at raising one's self-awareness, thus leading to personal growth and development. The present paper adopts a different approach to mindfulness by introducing a new concept conceived by the author: the Mental Territory. In this context, mindfulness is the technique of programming the Mental Territory, managing it, and finally taking advantage of the mental remarkable abilities to control the surrounding environment. By harnessing the power of the mind and controlling the mental models, a mindful person has the ability to deal with the challenges posed by fast-paced changes, and can therefore make the best decisions for every situation.

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INTRODUCTION

Each of us has ambitions and dreams which we constantly trying to fulfill. However, despite all endeavors, there are some moments in life when we feel the results obtained are less than satisfactory. Thus, disappointment and hopelessness may ensue, compelling us to ask, "Indeed, what is truly the key to achieving success or discovering the correct path of life?" To address this question, the present paper introduces a new concept called 'the Mental Territory.' The current work aims to elaborate on the need for mindfulness, propose a novel approach to this concept, and then explain the prerequisites for mind management. This is accomplished by answering the following three key questions:

DISCUSSION

1- Why Is Mindfulness Needed?

Technology's infiltration in today's world that is changing at warp speed has adversely affected modern lifestyles. In this regard, technology is identified as one of the main causes of mental distress, especially among the young generation. In consideration of this phenomenon and to address why mindfulness is needed, another important question must be posed: "Why has peace of mind been lost?"

There is no denying that advances in technology have greatly enhanced daily life. This improvement is impressive, but it has also inflicted irreparable damage on people's mental and physical well-being. As much as technology has made life simpler and more enjoyable, it has also created unnecessary

complexity which can disturb peace of mind. For example, Fig.1 presents a thought-provoking image of a family sitting next to one another on a sofa; each is busy with a different electronic device and pays no attention to the other family members sitting closeby. This is a realistic and actually alarming depiction of contemporary family life, in which each member is mesmerized by a personal electronic device. The family pictured presents an image that is the opposite of what computer manufacturers usually show in advertisements: loved ones experiencing a new electronic device together. Clearly, Fig.1's family portrait clashes with technology's objective to simplify life and render it more satisfying by improving communication. However, what the side effects of technology have actually succeeded in doing is to contribute to the breakdown of the family by separating its members.



Figure 1. ¹

¹ Source:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/fashion/01FAMILY.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> By Alex Williams, Published: April 29, 2011

Therefore, while acknowledging technological advances, one is unable to escape their side effects. Computer processors are becoming increasingly smaller and, of course, faster. However, a great paradox must be noted here. In spite of the speed provided by technology, there is still not enough time to accomplish daily tasks. What can be done to overcome these challenges?

Certainly, technology cannot be stopped. Only a dream weaver can talk about returning to Nature and leaving all advancements behind. The significant role that technology plays in fighting diseases, developing communication, and improving education and business cannot be denied. In fact, no other era has been given as many opportunities to realize its dreams as the one today. Technology is needed, but, instead of being controlled by technology, we need to step up and find strategies that incorporate the vision of humanity into the vision of technology. This is the only way in which the value of mankind can be truly salvaged, something which is possible by adopting a holistic approach to our physical, mental, and social well-being and focusing on the practice of cognitive skills, such as mindfulness, to maintain peace of mind.

According to Brian Tracy, *"The good news is that our mind is like a muscle. It grows stronger and more capable with frequent use. With practice, we can learn any behavior or change any habit that we consider undesirable or necessary"* (Tracy, 2007). Mindfulness is essential because a person who practices mindfulness has the ability to deal with the challenges posed by fast-paced changes, and can therefore manage, organize, and filter input from the surrounding environment.

2- What Is Mindfulness?

Perhaps the most widely known definition of mindfulness in the scientific literature is "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1995). Mindfulness is a receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience occurring both internally and externally (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Studies show that mindfulness curtails negative functioning and enhances positive outcomes in several important life domains, including mental health, physical health, behavioral regulation, and interpersonal relationships (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007; Hede, 2010; Langer, 2009).

Before continuing the discussion on mindfulness, the present paper shall introduce the concept of the Mental Territory, one of the most simple mindfulness practices for daily life. This Mental Territory is based on the concept of mental models, which falls in the

field of cognitive psychology and, because of its simplicity, provides a better understanding of how mindfulness actually works.

In reference to Fig. 2; the human mind has a Mental Territory, ranging from a negative infinity to a positive infinity. These two areas play a significant role in the function of the mind and characterize the degree of importance attributed to everything entering the mind — thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and memories. The mind maximizes what it allocates to the positive infinity and minimizes that which it sends to the negative infinity. Therefore, the mind devotes most of its attention, focus, and energy to what is in the positive infinity. Considering this, the contents of the positive infinity have the potential to turn into a person's main focus or philosophy of life. On the other hand, that which is placed in the negative infinity is mostly set aside by the mind and is seldom referred to.



Figure 2.

In consideration of the importance of the events and thoughts located in the positive infinity, one should be extremely careful about the nature of these thoughts. If the positive infinity is filled with destructive thoughts, the mind will give these the greatest attention. Eventually, peace of mind will be disturbed and distortion of reality will set in. As for the function of negative thoughts, it should be noted that such thoughts first find their way into the positive infinity. Negative messages can then gradually take total control of a person's belief system, which propels the individual to act upon these orders and result in mental and physical trauma. Violent acts against oneself or society stem from the presence of negative and detrimental thoughts in the positive infinity. Such harmful behavior will finally isolate a person from reality. The following examples explore this issue more in-depth:

I. Without needing to, the mind has the habit of frequently referring to its memories. Therefore, it constantly faces the challenge of unwanted shifts between the present and the past as most people live in a world dictated by time, in memories of the past or anticipation of the future. In fact, there is a restless monkey inhabiting the mind, what Buddhists call 'the Monkey Mind,' which continuously causes thoughts to shift from one to another. If the Monkey Mind is not effectively managed, it will gamble away time and stir up mental chaos. However, mindfulness is

one of the best practices to manage the Monkey Mind, through controlling the mental models.

Consider a young man who committed suicide because he had failed to win over his beloved's heart. The question to ponder is whether the relationship with the young woman was so critical that its loss would have warranted taking his life or if the suicide was the result of a distorted and magnified image of a romance existing only in the young man's imagination. In fact, the trouble probably all began when this person puts his relationship in the positive infinity of the mind, the perspective from which he views life. He gives too much weight to the relationship and overemphasizes its importance. According to cognitive psychology, the young man's behavior stemmed from his misperception of reality and not reality per se. Without having mastered mindfulness, he was never able to recognize the true nature of reality, in this case, the possibility of living without the beloved. He could only experience his misperception of reality which considered life as meaningless without her. In this case, the Monkey Mind controlled his belief system and mental state.

What should be noted here is the importance of the mental models and their leading role in the one's Mental Territory. Due to the principles of cognitive psychology, people respond to the world according to their mental models. These are the ways by which the surrounding environment is interpreted and understood. Mental models (a.k.a. cognitive maps or internal representations) are defined (Senge, Roberts, Ross, & Kleine, 1994) as the images, assumptions, and stories that one carries in the mind. These are deeply ingrained assumptions or generalizations and often take the form of pictures or images in an individual's mind. Most people are not aware of their mental models, which are hidden or unconscious (Stacey, 2007). According to psychologist and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker (1999), *"Our experiences of the world are represented in our minds as mental models. These mental models can then be associated and compared with others and used to synthesize completely new images. In this way, mental models allow us to form the theories of how the world works by formulating likely sequences of mental images without having to directly experience the outcome"* (Pinker, 1999). Therefore, the purpose of mental models is to allow one to predict and explain events, note the relationships among the components, and predict what may occur next (Malan, 2005).

Considering the functional importance of the mental models, reality is not what enables or disables us, rather, it is the perception or misperception of reality which shapes our behavior. That is because the mental models are internal pictures of the external

world. T. Harv Eker states, *"The mind is a powerful tool, but it is also the greatest soap-opera scriptwriter in history! It creates powerful stories based on dramas or disasters that have never happened and likely never will"* (Eker, 2009).

Since perceptions are the reflections of mental images, the role of mindfulness is to help the individual make decisions based on the realities of the surrounding world, not on an exaggerated misperception of events. Consequently, the perception of events and their assignment as right or wrong, valuable or worthless are the duties of an organized mind. Such a mind is responsible for analyzing incoming data; such that no thought enters without being weighed and considered. What the organized mind views as valuable and useful is allocated to the positive infinity and what is considered as worthless is allocated to the negative infinity. Thus, negative stimuli and messages, which are not selected as positive infinity thoughts, do not detrimentally affect an individual's belief system.

As a result, if the desperate young man in the first example had succeeded in finding a way to control and manage his Mental Territory and resist the influence of destructive thoughts, he would have been able to make a rational decision and control the Monkey Mind, all with the aid of mindfulness.

II. The second example deals with a suicide bomber, perhaps a religious extremist, whose violence causes terror and destruction. Similar to the previous example, there is a distortion of reality in play when the human mind passes on twisted values to the positive infinity, thus giving them immense importance. The tragedy of September 11th, 2001, is a prime example of how destructive thoughts can infiltrate the positive infinity of the (terrorist's) mind. What should be noted here is the devastating effects of failing to consciously manage one's mind. There is a serious risk that others may plant dangerous thoughts in the mind's positive infinity, a phenomenon called mind control or brainwashing. Osho states, *"If someone is throwing garbage into your house you will fight with that person, but if someone is throwing garbage into your mind you will not fight with him! You are not aware that your mind can also be filled with garbage. If your mind is like a guesthouse, if it is not well protected, then it will be difficult for you to become free of impure thoughts. You should consciously watch over your mind, constantly watching what is happening inside you and rejecting whatever is useless"* (Osho & Rajneesh, 2010).

III. One of the practical outcomes of practicing mindfulness is positive thinking. Positive thinking is an optimistic way of perceiving surrounding events.

In other words, instead of focusing on negative aspects, one concentrates on positive ones and therefore enjoys a healthy outlook and behavior. Considering this, positive thinkers effectively understand how the mind functions and works. As Joseph Murphy comments, *"An excellent way to get acquainted with the function of the mind is to look upon your own mind as a garden. You are a gardener, and you are planting seeds (thoughts) in your mind all day long, based on your habitual thinking. As you sow in your mind, so shall you reap in your body and environment. Your mind may be likened to the soil, which will grow all kinds of seeds, good or bad. Every thought is, therefore, a cause, and every condition is an effect. For this reason, it is essential that you take charge of your thoughts and manage them so as to bring forth only desirable conditions"* (Murphy, 2007).

According to Anthony Robbins, *"...there is a famous story told about Tom Watson, the founder of IBM. One of his subordinates had made a horrendous mistake that had cost the company ten million dollars. He was called into Watson's office and said, 'I suppose you want my resignation.' Watson looked at him and said, 'Are you kidding? We just spent ten million dollars educating you'"* (Robbins, 1987). It should be noted that, by truly practicing mindfulness, Tom Watson was able to put 'the ten million dollar loss' in the negative infinity of his mind. He held on to the positive assumptions about human nature though (in this case, human resources) and placed them in the mind's positive infinity. In fact, his attitude is based on Brian Tracy's statement (2007): *"Difficulties come not to obstruct, but to instruct."* For this reason, positive thinkers are better able to control their thoughts. If asked to discuss any subject, mindful people consider the positive aspects as well as recognizing the negative ones, while they view the glass as half-full.

IV. The last example is related to one of the daily applications of the Mental Territory technique, when working with personal computers. At times, perhaps we have all encountered computers that hang or slow down. From a technical point of view, this can originate from CPU overuse. This problem usually occurs when multiple programs are simultaneously run and the CPU is unable to process all of them. Actually, many of these programs are often not needed at the time and are only running because they are in the Windows startup and run in the background; in effect, they waste processing capacity. All that is needed to remedy this situation is to run the "Windows Task Manager" and "End Process" the unwanted programs. As described, unwanted factors already placed in the CPU (the most critical part of the computer) are "end

processed." In fact, this is similar to how the Mental Territory functions. Unwanted thoughts are consciously moved from the positive infinity (the most critical part of the mind) into the negative infinity. As seen, the interesting point of this analogy is that the CPU works similarly to the mind.

Now, let's put the proposed strategy into practice. On a piece of paper, draw the Mental Territory diagram (Fig. 3). Write down the thoughts that really occupy your mind's positive or negative infinity the most. It may be hard for you to believe what is actually going on inside your mind! Do these thoughts really deserve the place they occupy or should they be moved to either the positive or negative infinity? By performing this practice, you will realize how much energy is consumed by certain thoughts. In fact, all that is needed for managing the Mental Territory and controlling the mental models is to monitor and organize the information that enters your mind. By doing so, you can be aware of what is happening in the Mental Territory, an ability which enables you to think outside the box.

There are some useful techniques by which one can manage, organize and filter incoming data. Using the concept of the Mental Territory, the current paper introduces a four-step diagram for practicing mindfulness. This diagram is structured based on the concept of the **Reticular Activating System (RAS)** with a special emphasis on double-loop learning. Such a process begins by dividing incoming messages into either the positive or negative infinity of the mind. To do so, one should observe thoughts, analyze the nature of the incoming data and ask vital questions such as, "Is this really necessary for my survival and success?" In this context, the real significance of matters is determined logically and realistically and not by the misperception or distortion of reality.

To discuss this diagram in-depth, a detailed analysis of how the proposed technique really works is provided here:

1. Receive positive or negative messages from the surrounding environment.
2. Observe and analyze the nature of incoming data using cognitive functioning.
3. Confirm vital and valuable data, necessary for your survival and success, by absorbing and sending them into the positive infinity of the mind as guidelines to be performed.
4. Filter and reject the negative or worthless messages by moving them into the negative infinity of the mind.

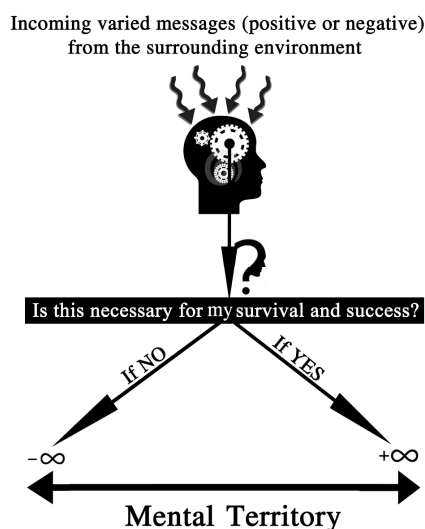


Figure 3.

By diligently practicing these four steps and managing the Mental Territory, one can master one of the most simple mindfulness practices for daily life. The mindful person utilizing this approach is equipped with a mental filter which carefully judges every thought from a realistic viewpoint and then purifies and finally confirms it as a positive infinity thought. This is a double-loop learning which begins when people constantly question and challenge their own unique mental models (Stacey, 2007). By doing so, this mechanism acts like the 'watchman at the gate' for the mind and its chief function is to protect the mind from false impressions (Murphy, 2007). In this way, the mind acquires the ability to distinguish negative, worthless, and disempowering thoughts from the positive, valuable and empowering ones. As long as one is cognizant of what transpires in the Mental Territory, there is self-awareness. In other words, one is aware of the nature of the thoughts and beliefs that have already been placed into the mental models.

3- What Is Needed Before Achieving Mindfulness?

So far, we have come to understand that peace of mind has been lost due to the detrimental side effects of technology. This indicates the necessity of acquiring and mastering mindfulness. However, can an individual practice the mindfulness process at any given moment or is there a series of prerequisites to be met? To answer this question, we need to know a little more about the functions of the brain. The brain has two seemingly identical hemispheres. However, extensive examination has identified that these hemispheres have different specific functions and control various types of activities. Based on the theory of 'left-brain or right-brain dominance,' the left hemisphere of the brain is designed for analytical

thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and other logical tasks. These require cognitive functioning in order to deal with problems, something which necessitates high brain activity and energy. Conversely, the right hemisphere of the brain is mainly designed for relaxation, tranquility, happiness and enjoyment, all of which provides the required energy for the left hemisphere. The energy generated by the right hemisphere is transmitted to the left hemisphere by the means of a flat group of nerve fibers called 'the Corpus Callosum' which connects the two cerebral hemispheres and enables communication between the two.

In regard to the analytic nature of mindfulness, the left hemisphere is more responsible for carrying out the process. However, according to Baras, there is a problem: *"In today's fast-moving world, there is way too much information and our brain, might reach a point of pressure very often. This is when the brain pushes the "red alert" button and says, 'Enough! No more analyzing, and no more thinking!' If we ignore this signal, the sound of the red alert increases until we just shutdown from exhaustion. The risk of not paying attention to the warning signs are that sometimes, we overload the left brain. The best way to change the balance and turn off the warning signs is to use the right brain more and create positive energy. Fun things we enjoy and love doing can do this straight away"* (Baras, 2012).

In consideration of this, the left hemisphere requires sufficient energy for facilitating mindfulness, an analytical activity of the brain. Notably, due to the volume of its analytical activities, the left hemisphere's spent energy needs replenishment. Therefore, the right hemisphere absorbs this energy from the environment by various methods and transfers it to the left hemisphere through the Corpus Callosum. This energy is used to provide a balance between the two hemispheres, and safeguards the individual's mental health through proper brain functioning.

The methods of creating energy for the left hemisphere are not limited and each individual can benefit from different means of creating energy. More importantly, in fact, is the effectiveness of the method chosen by the individual to facilitate the release of endorphins by the right brain. Even simple activities, such as shopping, traveling, dancing, reading, and painting, can have a tremendous effect on one's mood and so create an abundant supply of energy. There is no specific method by which to achieve this. It is up to the individual to find what works best. As Neale Donald Walsch comments, *"If you experience joy eating a salami sandwich, then do that!"* (Byrne, 2006).

CONCLUSION

It goes without saying that the power of the mind is a determining force in today's world. Therefore, mindful people who effectively wield this power can achieve the greatest success. Dr. John Hagelin states, "*We are using at most 5% of the potential of the human mind. 100% human potential is the result of proper education. Imagine a world where people are using their full mental potential*" (Byrne, 2006). This observation resounds the need for mindfulness.

Based on all that has been discussed and considering the functional importance of the Mental Territory, the present paper argues that mindfulness deals largely with managing and programming the Mental Territory. By controlling it, the individual is able to take advantage of the mind's remarkable abilities and so effectively face the challenges of the surrounding world. This practical ability finally leads to personal growth and development.

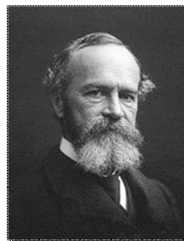
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"The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind."

William James (1842-1910)