

Synthesis Essay - Foundation

Bangor University

How Mindfulness Supports My Career Change

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In January 2015 I left the company I was working for after eleven years and decided to build my own business. It was not a sudden decision, but a radical one nevertheless. I had been suffering for a while because of the high pressure and had lost the purpose and sense of my life. What I will be talking about is not just switching jobs. It is not only about what I wanted to do next, but how to live my life and preserve my health. I will describe the process involved in such a transformation and the challenges that arose on the journey. I will explain how mindfulness and its attitudinal foundations (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) have been “a great protector” (Salzberg, 2011, p. 178), particularly supportive and inspiring for such a major life change.

A Transformative Process

The Courage to Change

When you have no job in our society, you are no one: This is certainly one of the main limiting beliefs I had and one of the reasons why it took me so long to change. How to present myself when being asked: “What do you do?” and losing my social status was very scary, if not paralysing. It was nothing less than losing my identity. So it was better to carry on and wear a mask, pretending everything was fine. I was “stuck in a particular role” (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 499) and couldn’t see any escape. I was successful in my career and liked the recognition I received, but for years I had felt fragmented and was avoiding “the whispered longings of my own heart” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 25).

The first silent retreat I attended in August 2014 enabled me to become fully aware of my situation and the disaster looming: crying, impatience, a restless mind, re-living old emotional pain, difficulty in breathing, and problems with food. Rumi’s words: “Keep looking at the bandaged place, that’s where the Light enters you” (as cited in Santorelli,

1999) resonated in me. That retreat was a key milestone in reconnecting with myself, gathering new energy, and finding the courage to change when the opportunity came up. Eventually I followed my true aspirations, “for the world needs your tune, remains incomplete without it, and waits, endlessly patient, for your voicing of your song” (Santorelli, 1999, p. 84).

Bounce Back and Reopen

I left my job completely exhausted, burned out. I was denying this while in the midst of it, but once I left that toxic environment, I realised how great an illustration of the stress-reaction cycle I was (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The long period of stress and feelings of being trapped left scars in my mind. I could observe feedback loops in action (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013) and how these were reinforcing the avoidance mode (Chaskalson, 2014; Williams & Penman, 2011): During the first 6 months, I had an extreme aversion to anything that reminded me of my previous job, experiencing a restless mind, agitation, stomach pain, and pressure in my chest. Studying mindfulness taught me that to deny or push away is dangerous and leaves little room for change, whilst seeing things as they are opens the door to transformation (Segal et al., 2013). So each time I noticed signs of aversion, I took a deep breath, brought my attention back to my bodily sensations, acknowledged the reaction, and observed it in more detail. “This is important because we can’t intentionally let go of unhelpful patterns unless we are aware of them” (Segal et al., 2013, p. 91).

I used my body as a barometer to sense when I would be ready for the next step. For example, being able to take the train (I had to go to London for work regularly) without experiencing difficulty in breathing and agitation was a good sign. After a while my stomach pains also disappeared. This attitude of curiosity, openness, and allowing enabled me to develop a more positive mental attitude. Neuroscience studies showed the beneficial effects of meditation on stress reduction and depressive moods (Hölzel et al., 2011). I started to feel

more optimistic. Everything was possible again. I got the feeling that my life was back in control, a key characteristic of resilience according to Kobasa (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Thanks to a clearer state of mind and liberated creativity, a new vision emerged (Williams & Penman (2011) cited an experiment that demonstrated how the approach mode we cultivate in mindfulness stimulates creativity).

Setting intentions

Having a personal vision is very powerful as it represents the deepest expression of what we want in life and becomes a guide for our decisions and an indicator of our sense of satisfaction (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). It was obvious to me that this was a very important element to clearly define before taking actions. I found it extremely helpful to meditate on: “What is my Job on the planet?” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 240)

Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, and Freedman (2006) described the fundamental role of intention in the self-regulation and self-management process, being one of the three axioms of mindfulness mechanisms. I now regularly question my intention so I can maintain my true north. I practice Yoga every morning in order to feel grounded and centred: It sets me up for the whole day. I also integrate some formal and informal mindfulness practices throughout the day so that I stay connected to my intention. This gives me a lot of confidence and stability in what I am doing and trust in my own intuition. This ability to come back to my personal vision and intention gives me energy when I feel lost or discouraged and helps me refocus my attention. In these moments, I practice the mountain meditation to “stand firm in that which you are” as Kabir tells us (as cited in Santorelli, 1999).

Identity Shift

Vulnerability. Despite everything it is not easy to let go of previous social ranking, life style and be confronted with this uncomfortable and persisting thought of being no one. I felt guilty for having no job and very vulnerable not being able to label myself professionally.

I existed only for my work so who was I without it? Fear, sadness, and a deep feeling of being incomplete overwhelmed me. This was most noticeable while doing the exercise of changing seats (I had recently attended another 8-week course). The fear of what people would think and their judgement caused a strong sensation of pressure in my chest and I became very emotional. Opening up to my own vulnerability has become a way of feeling stronger, letting go of some “ego-defence mechanisms” (Goleman et al., 2002) and accessing more freedom.

The self. We are so conditioned by our perceptions and how others perceive us. We build a solid and permanent concept of ourselves, trying to “solidify who we are” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 140). Observing those mental constructs, this “selfing” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 270) and how “we treat it as if it were a static and enduring entity” (Gunaratana, 2011, p. 31) is a transformative element of the mindfulness practice. I try and meditate on “who is having this sensation?” when I notice a sensation for example or on the question “who am I?” “Recognising that there is nothing fixed or intrinsically real at the core of my identity as a person” (Batchelor, 2011, p. 49) is very hard to grasp, but it opens up new perspectives. This spirit of inquiry can bring “the insight that everything is potential and that there is no solid isolated self means we can redefine ourselves. We can break free of our own limited definitions of ourselves” (Hougaard, 2015, p. 193).

Wholeness. As mentioned previously, I observed a clear aversion at the beginning: I didn’t want to be this businesswoman anymore; the past was an enemy. Observing this aversion in more detail, I understood that I was frightened to fall into the same trap of stress and exhaustion. Then I realised that some of the skills of the past could still be useful and I started to think of myself as a hybrid, being more at peace and creating more space. Today, I feel comfortable that I can be more than all of this.

The body scan helps me gain a sense of wholeness, letting go of the need to prove my right to exist, stopping fighting for a moment, and detaching myself from a professional label. Slowly I am starting to get the sense of just being, with no role to play. I am experiencing moments in my day-to-day life when I feel warmth and a blossoming joyful sensation in my heart. A walk in the country fills me with wonder, it reminds me that there is more to life than work and makes me feel whole again. Yoga is also a great way to experience my body “as a door into freedom and wholeness” (Kabat-Zinn, n.d., p. 211). My practice reminds me to “try and stop wanting to be someone, and simply be” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 272). This is tremendously helpful when work is no longer an active part of your life.

Last but not least, this opened a new chapter in my relationships with friends, family, and my partner: I can be loved for who I am and not what I do.

Dealing with Challenges

Very soon, I had to face old demons and bad habits and accept that I carry my history with me. The way Santorelli (1999) described how facing our darkness is essential to make the change we want more authentic and sustainable was very encouraging and inspiring. My tutor this year was also very supportive.

Time

Despite dreaming of having plenty of time for myself, my relationship with time became problematic.

Slowing down. I was used to performing and being very busy, jumping from one thing to another, proud of my ability to multitask. My life was dictated by work deadlines. Today, I can still feel the constellation of negative thoughts and emotions that are reactivated easily (Williams & Kuyken, 2012) as soon as an unplanned task or event pops up in my day. This manifests itself as tension in my jaw and arms, high blood pressure, and the urge to rush, the “action addiction” (Hougaard, 2015, p. 41). My posture in Tai Chi reflects this tendency:

I constrict my torso and accelerate my movements. When I try and slow down I feel impatient or bored, or even depressed. Finding the right balance is very subtle and needs caution. Mindfulness practice is strengthening my ability to pay attention to those moments, catch impulses, and change the rhythm skilfully. It ensures I don't pack my days again and helps simplify my life (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Finding my own rhythm. It is quite unrealistic to expect different results from the same solution, so one has to take a wider view, think out of the box when planning a major career change, as in the nine-dots exercise (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The quality of the beginner's mind is precious in order to be open and explore new solutions. I reviewed my list of activities, identified those that nourish or deplete me (Williams & Penman, 2011), and created my own agenda. I realised I needed a slow start in the morning: yoga, drinking tea, and reading on my sofa before switching on the computer. I now respect my physiological need for lots of sleep; consequently I wake up in a better mood and do not judge myself too harshly. I can work on weekends and allow myself a day-off in the week.

However, practicing kindness by taking the time and caring for myself created a resistance related to the fear of losing the edge. I criticised myself: "I am getting lazy, I am going nowhere". This was reinforced by a strong striving pattern that I will elaborate on later. "We are afraid of this tenderness because we think that it will compromise our power, our capacity to think analytically [...] Perhaps we don't want to appear weak, unprofessional, soft. But this is not what happens" (Santorelli, 1999, p. 166). Definitely not! Practicing these new habits consciously, I can see that respecting my own rhythm protects my creativity, reinforces my self-confidence, and develops self-compassion. It is all much more sustainable.

Non-doing. I also do a formal practice after lunch, cultivating the "non-doing, the domain of true meditation, in which it looks as though nothing or nothing much is happening or being done, but at the same time, nothing important is left undone" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p.

25). Kabat-Zinn (1994) praised the non-doing and described its paradox. It has nothing to do with passivity and can reveal the richness of the next moment. It helps me not only step out of time but also try and detach myself from outcomes. This leads me to the next challenge and my main pattern.

Striving

Driven-doing mode vs. being mode. It didn't take long to fall into the unwanted and old patterns and replicate ways of working totally in autopilot, highlighting cognitive rigidity (Hougaard, 2015). In the corporate world, we are conditioned to be competitive, deliver results, and be successful. I regularly observe this behaviour when I am in a group: I compare myself to others, force my view in discussions, become impatient and interrupt people when we don't make progress or come to a conclusion. Alone, I can read books frenetically to satisfy my tremendous need for information and expertise. I continuously monitor my to-do-list and measure the gap between where I am and where I want to be. All of this indicates a strong driven-doing mode and discrepancy-based processing (Bishop et al. 2004; Segal et al., 2013; Williams, 2008). I behave sometimes like this young boy with his donkey, forcing things (Williams & Penman, 2011). But with regular and sustained mindfulness practice, "you learn to stop wasting time pointlessly running through the same old habits of thinking and doing that have long since stopped serving any useful purpose" (Williams & Penman, 2011, p. 37). Thanks to the very precise perception of my physical sensations, which I acquired through the body scan, I can identify signals more quickly, consciously choose not to be caught out by them and respond differently. For example, in December 2015, I felt again those well-known stress symptoms and decided to postpone some planned activities for two months. In the past, I would have pushed myself above healthy limits.

Shifting gears (Segal et al., 2013) is a key step when my mind gets agitated, preventing me from thinking clearly and staying focussed. I stop for a moment and have a

three-step breathing space, drink a glass of water, water the flowers, or look out of the window. Back to the present moment through attention to sensations, in the being mode (Segal et al., 2013; Williams, 2005; Williams & Penman, 2011), I then feel calmer and can resume my work. The self-regulation of attention, the skills in sustained attention, and switching we develop in mindfulness (Bishop et al., 2004) are the guardians of a better work-life balance.

Rumination. A direct consequence of this discrepancy monitoring is rumination and negative thinking (Bishop et al., 2004), which actually exacerbate the situation as studied by Nolen-Hoeksema (as cited in Segal et al., 2013). I can see how I get in my own way: I get the “the second arrow of pain” (Chaskalson, 2014, p. 146) by thinking how stupid I am to fall into the trap again or for not being able to switch off, desperately trying to fix the problem. I identified as well “unhelpful automatic routines” such as catastrophising (Chaskalson, 2014, p. 42). Mindfulness helps develop the ability to disengage, decentre, and come back to the present moment through bringing our attention on bodily sensations (Segal et al., 2013). “Thus, disengaging from one’s goals should facilitate the release from ruminative thinking” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 236). Well, I can laugh about it a bit more now, showing a capacity to observe myself, but “the feeling that our clever problem-solving abilities should be able to sort out all our problems is very compelling and cannot be switched off easily” (Segal et al., 2013, p. 178). In the middle of a career change, it is quite a challenge not to crave for outcomes.

Attachment to outcomes. I am fully aware that this striving pattern leads systematically back to the exhaustion funnel (Chaskalson, 2014; Segal et al., 2013), which led me to a burnout in the past. Even today it is still an effort to take regular breaks. It is difficult to allow myself to enjoy life. I want to succeed and achieve my goal first. Kabat-Zinn (2003) insisted on practicing with no attachment to outcomes in his paper citing

Borkovec. Being too attached to outcomes can seriously prevent success because this narrows one's view and one loses the global picture, but when my security is at stake it is quite hard to detach. There is a paradox here because I can trust that things will unfold in their own time, I know what I am capable of, but impatience remains, undermined by anxiety.

Facing uncertainty

All that I have previously described is directly linked to a deep feeling of insecurity. Will I make a living? Will I be able to still afford my flat? I can't "live the questions" as Rilke (2011) begs us. This uncertainty about my future generates anxiety. Santorelli (1999) gives us some guidance to learn to "dance with uncertainty, using it as a ground for the discovery of previously unforeseen possibility" (p. 139). Indeed, I can feel how much tension this fear creates and how this decreases my joy and enthusiasm.

Coming back to the present moment is the secret; this is where I feel safer and more relaxed. Seated on my cushion, I can sense Thich Nhat Hanh's words: "We are already arrived," (1992, p. 41) and the anxiety dissolves. Reading Kabat-Zinn (1994), I tested the posture of my hands in the sitting meditation: When turning the palms toward the sky, I experienced that I can let go and surrender, a different definition for success arises, while having my palms on my knees, striving and determination are reactivated.

In addition, I'd like to highlight the importance of community support. Since we are social beings, it is important to keep in touch with people. "In our loneliness and isolation, there is a deep longing, a yearning, usually unconscious or ignored, to belong, to be connected to a larger whole, to not be anonymous, to be seen and known" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 123). When I left my job, I suddenly lost a big part of my social life. I felt isolated and started to lose the joy of my new life. Joining Bangor gave me the opportunity to observe and experience the impact of group support. I found a sense of belonging and felt I was accepted (Mardula, 2014). New reference groups, especially resonant groups can also encourage and

facilitate the change as we can practice new habits in a safe environment (Goleman et al., 2002). I also realised I can't work alone; it doesn't make me happy and it diminishes my motivation. I need feedback and the stimulation of others. As a consequence, I am now making new partnerships. I can feel my level of energy rising and there is a smile on my face.

Last but not least, I genuinely trust the power of attraction and interconnection.

Goethe's words are profoundly inspiring for me and I experienced their truth often in my life:

Until one is committed, there is always hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising to one's favor all manner of unforeseen accidents and meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would come his way.

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it (as cited in Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 239).

Conclusion

Changing career and becoming self-employed was a great opportunity to implement new ways of working and being. Trusting the process, treating myself as my own laboratory, and reflecting on it gave me more confidence and access to my internal resources. It is not an exaggeration to say that this career change made my practice, as much as my practice made my career change. All those challenges gave me the opportunity to apply mindfulness in my day-to-day life. The transition is not finished, but there is more serenity, trust and peace in my life. I feel everything is coming together and everything makes sense.

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