

John Teasdale: What Happens in Mindfulness: Inner Awakening and Embodied Cognition

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Mindfulness

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01993-6>

Published: 01/11/2022

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Crane, R. (2022). John Teasdale: What Happens in Mindfulness: Inner Awakening and Embodied Cognition. *Mindfulness*, 13(11), 2904-2905. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01993-6>

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Review of What Happens in Mindfulness by John Teasdale

This new book by John Teasdale brings together his life work as a distinguished cognitive scientist (Dalglish, 2004) and co-developer of Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002; Teasdale et al., 2000), with the personal importance of contemplative practice to his life and work. John is uniquely positioned to engage in this integration and depth of analysis. He synthesises these ancient and contemporary ways of understanding the human mind-body-heart system and communicates how mindfulness addresses the inherent challenges and potentials of being human in a way that is accessible and graspable.

Much of the analysis draws on the ways that the Interacting Cognitive Subsystems (ICS) model offers a meta-framework for understanding human experience (Barnard & Teasdale, 1991; Teasdale 1996). ICS is a conceptual framework presenting a 'macro-theory' to support understanding of the dynamics of interactions of the various elements of experience (e.g., attention, memory, cognition, sensations, emotions, behaviour) within the human system. ICS emerged through collaborative work between Phillip Barnard and John Teasdale over many years, and John dedicates the book to Phil in honour of his development of the ICS architecture. ICS *'offers a general purpose tool for thought that has been fruitfully applied in a surprisingly wide range of areas – from improving the creativity of dancers of modern ballet, to the design of human -computer interfaces...'* (Teasdale, 2022, p. 3). John Teasdale, Mark Williams and Zindel Segal used ICS, when formulating the MBCT program, as a framework for understanding and mapping what is going on when people slide back into depression, and how mindfulness might offer a powerful way for them to halt this.

In this new analysis, John expands this understanding of *'what happens in mindfulness'* to a wider and deeper analysis of the processes at play for all of us when we engage in formal and informal mindfulness practice. He addresses both the everyday fruits of mindfulness, and fascinatingly, explores the ultimate potential for human awakening through this lens of psychological understanding of the processes that are at play.

As I read the book, I experienced a sense of deepening understanding of the familiar and known process of engaging in mindfulness practice. The text touched me into my lived experience of engaging in practice, and simultaneously catalysed new perspectives. This expansion of understanding is highly motivational – recognising what happens within our system when we practice mindfulness inspires us to keep engaged with the practice. It is also hugely resourcing. For those who are teachers of mindfulness-based programs (MBPs), the book builds understanding of the underpinning frameworks of understanding informing MBP teaching, which in turn help us to

tune our teaching in ways that support participants to access freedom from the habit patterns that drive distress. For those who are researchers of MBPs, these understandings point to the key mechanisms at play, and so present an expanded understanding of important areas for future empirical investigation.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section lays out foundational concepts related to the human tendency to engage in conceptually driven quests for happiness, which inevitably lead to avoidable suffering. Discovering how to harness the power of conceptual knowing as a force for good is one key to inner happiness. John reminds us that our capacities for conceptual knowing developed for good evolutionary reasons - to enable groups of early humans to collaborate on goals requiring skilled action. Conceptual knowing is a well-honed skill for this purpose, but when applied it to our inner world of feeling, it creates a sense of separation and disconnection. Crucially, we can also discover that conceptual knowing is not our only way of knowing – we have the capacity to dwell in what John calls: ‘holistic-intuitive’ knowing. When immersed in this way of knowing, the attention expands to receptively encompass a wider spectrum of inner and outer sensory input, which in turn enables us to naturally access a widened perspective that includes a receptive acceptance of the natural flux of experience, and an embodied knowing of interconnectedness within and beyond the immediacy of our own mind-body system. We can master and use with discernment these two different ways of knowing, and understand their evolutionary purposes, and their strengths and weaknesses. In essence, this first section lays out the vulnerabilities, challenges, and potentials of the human mind-body system.

The second section segues from this by unpacking a detailed analysis of ‘what happens in mindfulness’: the ways that mindfulness practice interfaces with our human vulnerabilities and potentials by helping us to rebalance the relationship between these two ways of knowing. The final section takes the analysis into new and engaging territory by exploring the human potential for inner awakening. In his methodical way, John unpacks what we mean by ‘inner awakening’, and how we can recognize and realize it in our own lives. Inspiringly, he touches on the social relevance and benefit of this close-in inner work. *‘Boundless love and compassion for all beings arise from seeing we are all parts of the same all-embracing whole....sustained by relationships of care and interrelatedness’* (Teasdale, 2022, p.7). John draws from Iain McGilchrist’s analysis of the ‘divided brain’ – the world of the left cerebral hemisphere being logical conceptual, problem-solving, detail-oriented, and the world of the right cerebral hemisphere, being embodied and whole-oriented (McGilchrist, 2019). McGilchrist posits that humans have shifted over time towards a more left hemisphere dominated way of operating in the world with damaging consequences for individual and collective wellbeing.

Whilst the practice of mindfulness has become popular and mainstream, understanding of the actual mechanisms by which mindfulness has its effects tend not to be so visible. The frameworks of understanding that surrounded the teaching of mindfulness in its original religious contexts are not easily accessible to those of us practising mindfulness in contemporary society. This book fills this gap by presenting an in-depth framework of understanding that honours the long lineages informing mindfulness teaching and practice, whilst simultaneously linking it to contemporary psychology, and making it accessible and relevant to us now.

The book is a vital contribution to our ongoing development of understanding of how mindfulness can meaningfully contribute to sustainable wellbeing for individuals, communities, organisations, and societies in the times we live in. Mindfulness can so easily be practiced, taught, and researched in ways that inadvertently strengthen prevalent human tendencies to dwell in conceptual, problem-solving dominated quests to be a better person, to get to a better, more pleasant place, or to improve health or performance. The book is a timely reminder to contextualise teaching and practice in a well formulated explanatory framework, so that the energy dedicated to cultivation of mindfulness is directed in ways that are fruitful. And as Jon Kabat-Zinn points out in his heartfelt foreword to the book, John's contribution in bringing psychological precision and clarity to this broader analysis of human potential is particularly welcome in the context of the wide-ranging challenges of the times we are living in. The escalating harm being perpetuated on each other and the ecological systems we depend upon are happening exactly because of the human-system vulnerabilities that the book explores. A wider focus on how, as a species, we can understand and shift the balance towards living with greater levels of collective wisdom is much needed.

The book is an important source of inspiration and practical guidance for practitioners of mindfulness; a supportive companion offering frameworks of understanding to guide and encourage practice. More widely, the book has the potential to inspire the field of psychology and related fields to grapple with greater urgency with the need for us to reconnect on both an individual and a collective social level with the realities of our deep interconnectedness with each other and with all life forms, and with the need for us to foreground our innate capacities for care, connection, and interrelatedness.

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