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ARTICLE

Mindful methodologies: Some limitations and concerns

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Abstract

This paper will offer reflections on the ways in which mindfulness has been presented as a potential research methodology in geography. I pick up from previous work that explored the utility of mindfulness to non-representational research methodologies, particularly regarding the ways in which mindfulness might allow us to attend to affect and more-than-rational knowledges. However, in this paper, I trouble the use of mindfulness as a methodology in non-representational work. I argue that geographers need to be careful about the use of mindfulness as a methodology and would prefer to think of the ways that mindfulness might inflect our research practice. This point is developed through three main concerns. The first is the ways that mindfulness is narrated as a perceived "fix" to the rationality of Western academic thought. This reinforces dualisms between Anglo-European academic knowledge as modern, disenchanted and rational, and traditional "non-Western" or indigenous vernacular or spiritual knowledge as non-rational and enchanted. The second concern is in regard to the universalisation of a mindful sensibility in mainstream understandings of mindfulness. I attend to the ways that processes of universalisation signal the whiteness of the movement and the ways the practice has been transmitted across contexts, cultures and institutions—a possible reason for the burgeoning methodological interest in mindfulness. Finally, this paper attends to ethics of care when using mindfulness as a methodology. Here, I focus on the ways that the pedagogical tenets of mindfulness could potentially open up participants to experiences of trauma and vulnerability. As a way forward, I advocate for a trauma-sensitive approach to mindful methodologies.

KEYWORDS

enchantment, mindfulness, non-representational methodologies, trauma, universalisation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Non-representational, post-phenomenological and posthuman work in geography has provoked debate about how geographers undertake research that evokes the corporeality and sensuousness of our more-than-human lifeworlds that are imbued with forces, affects and vibrations. Fundamentally, the body is a site and focus of research (Dewsbury, 2010; Vannini, 2015), or as an "instrument of research" (Longhurst et al., 2008). Here, we attend to the researching body, and the self, as incomplete, indeterminate, leaky and unstable (Nast & Pile, 2005), subject to forces that pass through and inhabit bodies and spaces that define what the body can do (Abrahamsson & Simpson, 2011; Colls, 2012). Thus, the body is not bounded and is always relational, imbricated and becoming with other bodies and things (Woodyer, 2008). This conceptualisation destabilises the authority of the self that researches, writes and knows themselves as an individualised and autonomous subject (Gannon, 2006). Geographers have grappled with the consequence of these theories and what they mean for how we might engage with geographical research (Lea, 2018). Work has suggested that we need embodied research methodologies that do not prioritise or privilege human senses over non-human others, nor that evoke a universal, fixed notion of self.

This paper explores the use of mindfulness as a geographical methodology, and offers some limitations and concerns regarding the approach previously taken by Whitehead et al. (2016). They argued that mindfulness could expose the habitualised and automatic ways in which we conduct ourselves during research. In this way, the authors claim that the practice provides methodological training and an intersubjective and intra-psychic research space, one that is more attentive to the more-than-rational, "often-unacknowledged aspects of emotional life for those being researched and those carrying out research" (Whitehead et al., 2016, p. 565). Their analyses focus on the merits of "bare awareness" and non-judgement in exposing the automatic and reactive nature of knowledge production, as it "enables us to be more aware of how we are reacting and how it may be possible to image reacting in different ways" (Whitehead et al., 2016, p. 563). Here, it is thought that bare attention offers an analytical space between conceptual explanation and interpretive response. Practically, the authors used mindfulness in their interviews with participants of the mindfulness programme in order to cultivate bare attention in the interview itself.

Firstly, I attend to the proposed merits of using mindfulness as a non-representational research methodology. From here I problematise this encounter through a concern with the ways that mindfulness is positioned as a methodological tool to access the non- or more-than-rational. I offer three interrelated arguments that offer a critique of the ways mindfulness might be mobilised as a methodological panacea.

2 | MINDFULNESS AS METHODOLOGY

Vibrant and multi-sensory methodologies seek to provide a diversity in our encounters, methodologies and understandings (Dowling et al., 2018) through multiple ways of doing. Vannini (2015) mentions the use of skilled practices to actively cultivate our or other's senses and bodies to become more aware of our sensory lifeworlds. Although he does not elaborate on what he means by this, one way of approaching this is through the use of somatic techniques that train bodies in certain ways. Somaesthetics is a way this idea is mobilised. Coined by Richard Shusterman (1999, 2006, 2008), somaesthetics is "concerned with the critical study and ameliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 1). Shusterman argues that through developing and training our awareness of the body and the senses, we can be philosophically and ethically enlightened, as "knowledge of the world is improved not by denying our bodily senses but by perfecting them" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 302). Somatic philosophical traditions, particularly "Asian" techniques (such as meditation and yoga) that "aim at instilling proper body-mind harmony, proper demeanour, and superior skill for appropriate action" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 8), are seen by Shusterman as useful ways of cultivating our bodies to be more receptive to sensory and wisdom worlds.

This is echoed by Dowling et al. (2018) who argue that moving beyond Western conceptualisations of the body and the senses would be a useful way of evoking the diverse, insensible, intuitive ways of knowing, thus allowing for a diversity of knowledges, worlds, and practices that are more-than-rational and more-than-Eurocentric. Relevant to this paper, however, there is a small body of interdisciplinary work that seeks to integrate (Buddhist) mindfulness practice and philosophies into social science methodologies and epistemologies. Methodologically, mindfulness mediation practice is being used as a way to cultivate particular modes of attention that heighten an embodied awareness (Stanley et al., 2015; Whitehead et al., 2016). Epistemologically, terminologies of mindfulness are employed to evoke a careful and ethical

doing of scholarship, as a mindful way of being (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; González-López, 2011). These will be discussed in turn.

Here, I draw on two examples of mindfulness meditation being employed as a methodology. First, Stanley et al. (2015) use mindfulness as an embodied methodological practice to understand psychosocial flows. Practically, researchers stopped and stood still in a busy area, during the daytime, in a public place, for 10 min. During the period of stillness, they used a "beginners mind"[1] to understand what was happening in the present. For this research, mindfulness allowed a suspension of expectation and analysis, bringing an intimacy of encounter with life lived in the moment. And second, through their use of mindfulness meditations during their interviews with civil servants, Whitehead et al. (2016, p. 561) provisionally explore mindfulness as a geographical non-representational methodology. Mindfulness is positioned as a way of cultivating an individual's sensitivity to the "affective push of the social and material worlds they inhabit", as well as, "the embodied forces of feelings and emotions". Techniques such as body scans "reveal the multitude of embodied vibrations, feelings, and fluctuations that we routinely ignore" (Whitehead et al., 2016, p. 562). For the authors, mindfulness is an important training technique that cultivates awareness of: intersubjectivity between participants and researchers, embodied and non-rational knowledge, moods and affects. In a sense, they argue that mindfulness heightens a particular attunement with the world, one that is more receptive to sensory vibrations and tone.

Epistemologically, mindfulness is seen to have great significance to geography, through exposing automatic and habitual ways in which we do scholarship and opening us up to non-rational knowledge (Whitehead et al., 2016). Stepping out of the habitual and becoming more receptive to affectual and sensory worlds evokes sensibilities of wonder and enchantment that are attuned to the magic in the world. Andrews (2018, p. 142) describes the ways mindfulness as sensibility might cultivate this sense of wonderment:

> Whereby a person might experience brief moments of self-transcendence in observing, touching and listening to their immediate environment. Whereby a person might experience the world, and their place in it, physically in the purest of forms, as free from preconceptions and judgements as possible; free from the constant stream of the mind's never ending self-narrative.

Closely related to this is Jennifer Laws' work on magical realism. Here, magic and enchantment are used as synonyms for each other, although the choice of the term magical realism is for explicit political and ontological reasons. Laws positions enchantment as an ontological intervention that flattens a hierarchical approach to reality in which magic is subordinate to rational happenings (2017, p. 12). With a theoretical history that originates in the Global South, a magical realist perspective is argued to provide a flattened space for subversive and magical narratives of those living with mental health conditions. Laws presents a pragmatic magical way of working, offering a manifesto for enchanted engagement with mental illness. Part of this work is to develop an "aesthetic disposition of openness" (Bennett, 2001; Laws, 2017). Here, mindfulness meditation is offered as a "modish" practice that "might encourage such magic sensitivity" (Laws, 2017, p. 15).

Elsewhere, mindfulness as a form of ethics or ethical embodiment is propelled by concerns with "mindful inquiry" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). As a way of doing research that seeks to be explicit and careful about scholarly epistemologies and ethics, it links together philosophical traditions of phenomenology (from Husserl), hermeneutics (from Heidegger), critical social science and Buddhism. Through integrating a Buddhist perspective, mindful inquiry wishes to overcome the bias of Western social science. Buddhist-inspired principles of mindful inquiry are as follows (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 39):

1. the importance of mindful thought itself;
2. tolerance and the ability to inhabit multiple perspectives;
3. the intention to alleviate suffering;
4. the notion of the clearing, or openness, underlying awareness.

Through the use of Buddhist principles, mindful inquiry is, first, a way to keep us "focused and grounded in the [research] process" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 161) in a world where media and technology are provoking an information-overload and an epistemological crisis in the validity of social science research (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Second, the mindful inquirer has an ethical obligation to respect the lives and orientations of others. Instead of the normal obligation of doing no harm in research, mindful inquirers have the intention to actively alleviate suffering. This notion of mindful ethics has been elaborated on by González-López (2011). Here, mindful ethics is an ethical consciousness, that keeps researchers aware of the taken-for-granted, and maybe mundane, contexts and

circumstances that shape participants' lives (González-López, 2011, p. 449). It is present focused and self-decentred—going beyond the social realities that exist in our lives and aware of multiple other perspectives that exist beyond traditional, rational, mainstream academia.

As we have seen, mindfulness could offer a fruitful methodology, particularly within non-representational geographies of embodiment and affect (Whitehead et al., 2016) and ethical orientation. Yet, I think we need to be careful why and how mindfulness is used methodologically. Mindfulness is not a methodological panacea, nor is it simply a neutral means of accessing particular forms of experience to render elements of affect and embodiment visible so that they can be easily translated into representational forms of writing. It is a form of intervention in the world, it in itself is a form of worlding and is not a means of experiencing a pre-existing world "out there". I further this argument through attention to three points, the first regarding the enchanting potential of mindfulness as a perceived "fix" to the rationality of Western academic thought. The second attends to the universalisation of experience in particular renderings of mindfulness. Finally, I attend to ethics of care and argue for a trauma-sensitive approach when utilising mindfulness methodologically.

2.1 | Enchanting potential of mindfulness

First, the use of mindfulness as a methodology is often tied into a particular trope that sees "non-Western" practices as a way to train a Western academic sensibility to become more aware of the non-rational, pre-cognitive, affectual, sensuous or even enchanted or magical. Examples of this are apparent in Shusterman's (1999, 2008) and Bentz and Shapiro's (1998) work. For Shusterman (2008), achieving bodily consciousness and attentive somatic awareness is "threatened" by the sensationalism and informational overload of a frantic modern, technological, life in which individuation and socialisation causes us to lose a sense of richness about the world. This disenchanting notion of the modern world is believed to be rectified by returning to a "sensory-rich world of wonder and enchantment", "the world we have lost when children" (Pocock, 1993, p. 11), one that can be realised through "Asian" somatic traditions, such as mindfulness (Shusterman, 2008). For the mindful inquirer, a similar tale of disenchantment is told. Here, academia is being damaged by an epistemological crisis where a society overloaded with information and technology is challenging scholarly claims to validity. A return to a "traditional" and non-Western knowledge system such as Buddhism is seen to re-enchant academic inquiry.

This particular framing of mindfulness as an academic sensibility reinforces dualisms between Anglo-European academic knowledge as modern, disenchanted and rational, and traditional "non-Western" or indigenous vernacular or spiritual knowledge as non-rational and enchanted. This aligns with Latour's (1993) argument in which the modern practice of dividing nature and culture is a way of separating "us" from "them", moderns from primitives. Insights from Jane Turner on embodiment in Balinese dance are helpful in rectifying this divide:

> The task here is not to demystify and rationalise Balinese dance drama and spiritual embodiment, or to exoticize Balinese culture as a site of enchantment and spiritual embodiment, but to acknowledge that embodiment takes many different forms, from surface imitation, to an in-depth level of experience that alters an individual's sense of being in the world.
>
> (Turner, 2015, p. 66)

Put another way, we need a reframing that acknowledges that enchantment is always already present in academic knowledge (Woodyer & Geoghegan, 2013), and also that different forms and knowledges of embodiment already exist in a "pluriversal world", "a world in which may worlds fit" (Sundberg, 2014, p. 34). It is important that we work with other ontologies, other than those within a Eurocentric context, but that we do so in a way that acknowledges difference and the incommensurabilities of knowledges (Dorries & Ruddick, 2018). Furthermore, working in a pluriversal world means that being explicit about the location of these knowledges is important (Sundberg, 2014). For example, the vague "Asian" (almost as a synonym for orientalised "otherness") aesthetic traditions Shusterman cites are not used in tandem with indigenous knowledges; he speaks for and about them. They are not intellectuals in their own right, but instead "disembodied representatives" "that serves European intellectual or political purposes" (Todd, 2016, p. 7).

2.2 | Mindfulness is a universal sensibility

Secondly, and in connection with the last point, mindfulness is propositioned to provide access to "the illusive fields of embodiment and affect" (Whitehead et al., 2016, p. 570). To do this a methodology would need to work "*against* a universalist sensibility" (Tolia-Kelly, 2006, p. 214, original emphasis), aware of the different affective capacities of bodies and how these are "signified unequally within social spaces of being and feeling" (Tolia-Kelly, 2006, p. 214). I am unsure of whether drawing on contemporary mindfulness practices under the rubric of first-wave Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and "bare attention" would be useful in this project (as done so by Whitehead and colleagues). The semantics of the contemporary mindfulness practices are figured around accessing "a universal state of being" (Arat, 2017, p. 173) and tied to the notion of a "foundational [human] capacity" (Nixon & Bristow, 2018)—as an inherent quality of the human condition. This assumes that these practices are universal, transcending historical and cultural context (Shannon, 2010). And that each mediator accesses a universal and perennial experiential realm (Drage, 2018).

The insistence on its universality allows it to be transmitted across contexts, cultures and institutions—a possible reason for the burgeoning methodological interest in mindfulness. Moreover, the idea that it unlocks a universal human condition is a particular way of thinking about meditation and mindfulness practices (Drage, 2018). Common forms of mindfulness meditation practised in contemporary life are particular synthesies or bricolages of different knowledges, discourses and meditative practices:

> What many Americans and Europeans often understand by the term "Buddhism," however, is actually a modern hybrid tradition with roots in the European Enlightenment no less than the Buddha's enlightenment, in Romanticism and transcendentalism as much as the Pali canon, and in the clash of Asian cultures and colonial powers as much as in mindfulness and meditation.
>
> (McMahan, 2009, p. 5)

Thus, mindfulness is not a neutral practice that can access a universal sensibility, and the belief that it can is a particular trope of the mindfulness zeitgeist. This universalism points to the "whiteness" of the mindfulness movement (Ng & Purser, 2015), both in terms of the popularity of the practice—Burke et al. (2017) found that meditation use was most prevalent among non-Hispanic whites in the North American context—and in the performance of the movement itself. Whiteness studies have revealed the ways in which whiteness is take-for-granted, normative and universal (Bonds & Inwood, 2016).

McCown et al. (2010) chart the emergence of the contemporary practices of mindfulness, based on an array of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) including MBSR and MBCT. Briefly, MBSR was founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the late 1970s at the University of Massachusetts Medical School to help alleviate general symptoms of chronic pain, stress-related illness and a variety of other conditions. MBSR is an 8-week programme that is split up thematically, exploring issues such as "automatic pilot" and "the pleasure and power of being in the present" (Blacker et al., 2015). MBCT was developed from MBSR by academics based at the University of Oxford: it follows a similar 8-week programme but combines Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) with mindfulness to treat depressive relapse (Segal et al., 2002).

Bringing mindfulness under the microscope of science meant that advocates began to shed and distance elements of the practice from its traditional Buddhist routes and language (Gilpin, 2008), in order to make "mindfulness and meditation understandable and commonsensical for regular people, all of us really" (Kabat-Zinn, 2004, p. 7). This was a process of rationalisation and objectification of mindfulness to render it measurable by clinical science. Drage (2018; and elsewhere, Arat, 2017) argues that the secularisation of mindfulness has not yet been achieved—and that it is dependent both "on the routinising movements of biomedicine *and* on a vision of hidden but vital enchantments" (Drage, 2018, p. 112, original emphasis), mediated by carefully selected representatives—so that recursive flows of authority, knowledge and truth claims made by mindfulness advocates which have forcefully propelled it into the arena of a contemporary zeitgeist.

Yet, this supposed secularisation of the practice has attempted to extract mindfulness from unwanted elements of "cultural baggage" (whilst keeping and preserving what is deemed appropriate by the white gaze) and colonialist connotations of the non-rational, mystical other. These two quotations are taken from books written by the founder of MBSR, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and the comedian and mental health advocate, Ruby Wax:

> Initially, I thought mindfulness meant sitting erect on a hillock, your legs in a knot, humming a mantra that was probably the phone book sung backwards. But I was still prepared to give it a whirl.
>
> (Wax, 2016, p. 7)

> When we speak of meditation, it is important for you to know that this is not some weird cryptic activity, as our popular culture might have it. It does not involve becoming some kind of zombie, vegetable, self-absorbed narcissist, navel gazer, "space cadet", cultist, devotee, mystic, or Eastern philosopher.
>
> (Kabat-Zinn, 2016, p. xiv)

By unbounding the practice from "Asian cultural constraints" (Goldstein, 2002, p. 2), mindfulness becomes a universal and neutral practice with white gatekeepers.

> We cannot separate the will of so many white comrades to journey in search of spiritual nourishment to the "third world" from the history of cultural imperialism and colonialism that has created a context where such journeying is seen as appropriate, acceptable, an expression of freedom and right.
>
> (Hooks, 1994, n.p.)

Many have argued that Buddhism, and mindfulness practices broadly, are situated within a "framework of white racial power and white supremacy" (Hsu, 2016, p. 372), which allows for a situation where "whiteness can remain a neutralised and privileged racial positioning" (Johnson, 2018, p. 18). Thus, in this article I draw attention to both the ways that a mindful sensibility is universalised and whitened in these renderings of mindfulness, and the colonial epistemic violence (Purser, 2019) at the heart of the secularisation and rationalisation of mindfulness through scientific paradigms.

I emphasise the need for care when considering the use of mindfulness as a non-representational methodology, and advocate for particular attention to the location of knowledge and the practices of embodied knowledge production undertaken in certain understandings of mindfulness. Uncritically adopting these aforementioned forms of mindfulness into our research practices as non-representational geographers would reproduce the pitfalls of universalist assumptions of affect. Affectual work in non-representational theory has made an effort to understand the ways in which affect is "collectively felt" whilst also recognising that affect is differently attached to as it becomes registered in bodies (Hitchen, 2021, p. 299). This means we must attend to the ways that affective registers are shaped by the power geometries in our social world and that affective capacities of bodies are signified unequally (Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Universalist versions of mindfulness negate the ways in which mindful affect is historically, socially and culturally mediated and felt—it is not a transparent or neutral realm that is accessible to all. This is attested to by meditators of colour who have felt "othered" in certain mindful spaces (for commentary on this, see Black, 2017).

2.3 | Mindfulness, trauma and ethics of care

Thirdly, we need to be careful about our ethical relations and relations of care when we use mindfulness meditation as a methodology. Part of the pedagogical orientation of mindfulness meditation is turning towards suffering and embodied vulnerability (Crane, 2009). In the context of research, this orientation could open up participants or the researcher to latent trauma or vulnerabilities otherwise unacknowledged or unforeseen:

> [W]hen we ask someone with trauma to pay close, sustained attention to their internal experience, we invite them into contact with traumatic stimuli—thoughts, images, memories, and physical sensations that may relate to a traumatic experience ... this can aggravate and intensify symptoms of traumatic stress, in some cases even lead to retraumatisation.
>
> (Treleaven, 2018, p. 6)

The experience of (re)inhabiting the body through mindfulness mediation can re-orientate the participant towards difficult experiences, memories, histories or relations, which can be a painful and challenging process. In the book *Trauma-sensitive mindfulness*, Treleaven elaborates on the unintended consequences of mindfulness practices: the (re)surfacing of trauma. His work unites mindfulness practices with an understanding of trauma, in order to minimise distress for those practising

mindfulness and to inform those living with traumatic stress the risks they face when meditating. Trauma-informed mindfulness would *realise* the impact of trauma, *recognise* the symptoms, *respond* to them skilfully—all to prevent *retraumatisation* (Treleaven, 2018).

If employed methodologically, mindfulness needs to be trauma-sensitive to maintain ethical robustness and to avoid any potential harm to participants. This is true of all participants, not just ones that are deemed "vulnerable" by ethics committees, as trauma is embodied and sticky—often failing to leave the body and embedded in the everyday (Adams-Hutcheson, 2017). We often do not know the past histories and memories of participants (even those deemed not vulnerable) that could resurface during meditation, haunting the present and playing out across the body. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the social context of trauma, in which trauma is not necessarily an individual tragedy but instead is "interconnected to larger systems of domination that shape our world" (Treleaven, 2018, p. 18). Trauma is both prevalent and political.

Finally, and briefly, we can also question the capacity of geographers to employ mindfulness as a methodology—many of us are not adequately trained to offer pastoral support in the university context, let alone support a participant dealing with the effects of trauma. Working with trauma-informed mindfulness teachers can be one way to support our methodological endeavours with mindfulness.

3 | CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the use of mindfulness as a methodology, and has cautioned against the use of a particular version of mindfulness in non-representational geographical methodologies, namely first wave MBSR and MBCT techniques. I problematised the ways mindfulness has been positioned as an affectual practice that might help geographers access non- or more-than-rational knowledges, which might re-enchant geographical knowledge production. This allowed me to explore the claim that mindfulness is a universal sensibility in mainstream understandings of the practice. Here, I focused attention on the ways that this process of universalisation has allowed the practice to be transmitted across contexts, cultures and institutions, something that might speak to the interest in mindfulness as a methodology. Finally, I offered a reflection on the pedagogical tenets of mindfulness and the ways that these could open participants up to experiences of trauma and vulnerability. Following from Treleaven's (2018) work, I advocate for a trauma-sensitive approach to mindfulness-based methodologies.

Thus, care needs to be taken when using mindfulness methodologically, and I (as a geographer who is not trained in mindfulness or trauma-sensitive pedagogies) cannot offer solutions to the issues I have presented here—they instead require further thought and reflection by those intending to use mindfulness in their research design. Future research needs to attend to these questions in order to develop the encounter between geography, geographical methods and mindfulness—an encounter that is being furthered, particularly through exploration of varied forms of mindfulness beyond the rubric of MBSR and MBCT, and the ways these might intersect with social movements (Schmid & Taylor Aiken, 2021).

In terms of a ways forward, I do see merits in carefully *beginning* to use critical and social mindfulness practices (Barker, 2014) to support researchers in their relational and ethical research practices and as a self-care mechanism to support them with pushing back against the structural conditions of the neoliberal academy. This thought is inspired by Buckingham's (2017) work on yoga as a micropolitical practice. Importantly, she does not offer yoga as a research methodology, but rather as a lens through which a researcher can understand how different ethical practices might *inflect* their professional work. Here, I end the article with a call for a greater appreciation of the ways that mindfulness might be used as an ethical embodied practice and technique of self-care in the neoliberal institution.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Beginners mind is a starting point to mindfulness, in which we are open-minded and present to the world – allowing for unexpected possibilities and happenings (Stanley et al., 2015; Suzuki, 1970).

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