

## ***Exploring the Effects of Mindfulness Meditation on Health, Well-Being, and Spirituality:***

### **An Interview with Shauna L. Shapiro**

*Recently, Leslie M. Schwartz interviewed Shauna L. Shapiro, Ph.D. about the impacts of mindfulness and meditation practices on one's health and well-being. Shapiro's personal studies on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and research on related topics are insightful about the potential benefits of these practices and their connection to spirituality.*

**Describe how you became interested in studying mindfulness and meditation. Where have your interests taken you in regards to research and travel experiences?**

I first became interested in mindfulness at age 19 when my father gave me a copy of *Wherever You Go, There You Are* by Jon Kabat-Zinn right before I went backpacking in the Gila wilderness in New Mexico. The combination of the mindfulness teachings and the simplicity of living in nature, allowed me to connect with a deep knowing and reverence for this way of living – this way of being. It was a beautiful and life changing month. When I returned from backpacking, my vision for how I wanted to lead my life and what I wanted to study were clear...all I wanted to study was mindfulness, at every level.

That same year, I was studying abroad in Israel where I met Sylvia Boorstein who introduced me to lovingkindness meditation (metta). I was very moved by her teachings, and this catalyzed my commitment to continue to study meditation. When I graduated from Duke University, I decided to travel through Nepal and Thailand to explore meditation further. While there, I met a beautiful monk who guided me to Wat Suan Mokh in Thailand where I attended my first Vipassana meditation retreat. This was truly an eye opening experience. First, I was awed by the unruly nature of my mind. It seemed impossible to tame it and keep it focused on the breath. The harder I tried, the more frustrated I became. Was everyone's mind like this? As I continued to practice, guided by the gentleness of the monks' teachings, my mind began to settle (more of its own accord than due to any effort on my part). I touched into a deep peace and an ease that I had never known. I also experienced a joyfulness and energy, and a deep sense of interconnectedness. I left the monastery committed to continuing what I had learned as I began graduate school back in the West.

It was at this point that I began my academic study of meditation and mindfulness. Those first few years, it was purely personal exploration; however when I returned after the months in East Asia, I entered a doctoral program in clinical psychology and began to bring the rigor of graduate training to my study of mindfulness. I was deeply fortunate to have the support of my academic advisors, Gary Schwartz, Dick Bootzin and Al Kaszniak – all of whom encouraged me to continue my academic study of mindfulness. During this time I continued my personal practice of mindfulness under the guidance of Shinzen Young, and also began to conduct research on the benefits of mindfulness.

Out of my personal meditation practice, as well as the teachings from numerous meditation teachers and readings, I began to evolve a systemic, holistic definition of mindfulness. Mindfulness is often translated as “bare attention” – just paying attention in the present moment. Yet, in my experience the *way* I attended and *why* I attended was vitally important. So in terms of a simple, yet nuanced definition, what I like to say is that *mindfulness is the awareness that arises out of intentionally paying attention in a kind, open, and discerning way*. This definition covers the three core elements of mindfulness: (1) Intention, (2) Attention, and (3) Attitude. *Intention*, in this definition, involves knowing why one is paying attention. It involves motivation; a conscious direction and purpose. *Attention* involves the direct, moment-to-moment knowing of what is happening as it is actually happening; the mind is trained to focus, aim, and sustain attention. *Attitude* describes *how* one pays attention, referring to the accepting, caring and discerning qualities of mindfulness (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006).

### **Describe your current research on meditation and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR).**

My first study examined the effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn) on medical students. We randomly assigned students to the meditation class or a control group, and studied the effects on their stress, anxiety and depression levels, as well as their reported empathy and spirituality. We found dramatic results: The students in the meditation group were significantly less stressed than the control group, and reported significantly greater levels of empathy and spirituality (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998). Since this first study, I have conducted numerous additional studies exploring the effects of mindfulness in health care and education across diverse populations, including women with breast cancer, persons with insomnia, adolescents in recovery, graduate students in counseling psychology, and professionals in all fields of health care (Ong, Shapiro, & Manber, in press; Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007; Shapiro, et al., 2005; Shapiro, et al., 2003; Shapiro, et al., 2001).

Currently, I am most interested in integrating mindfulness and contemplative practice into higher education in general, and in the helping professions in particular. I believe meditation can serve as a powerful complement to traditional educational curricula. Particularly relevant to the health care fields, I believe mindfulness can serve to help students learn self-care as well as essential clinical skills. For example, two of the most important qualities of being a good therapist are presence and empathy; mindfulness meditation explicitly cultivates these skills. Thus, mindfulness practices not only can foster self care, they also can enhance ability to care for others (Shapiro & Izett, in press).

We recently examined these claims in a study at Santa Clara University, assessing the effects of a MBSR course for counseling psychology students. Our study found that compared to matched controls, those in the mindfulness group reported significantly decreased stress and increased compassion (Shapiro, Brown, Biegel, 2007). I am hoping to continue the exploration of how to integrate mindfulness into higher education, and especially the health professions.

### **What positive benefits can mindfulness and meditation have on one's health and well-being as it relates to spirituality?**

Mindfulness and meditation can be found in all religious and spiritual traditions; however, as we teach it in the West and in the health care field, spirituality oftentimes is not emphasized. Rather, mindfulness is taught as a universal human capacity – a way of being available to everyone. Spirituality is a term that often carries a lot of different meanings for different people. Thus, I tend to error on the side of not mentioning it and allow people to discover the spiritual dimensions of mindfulness and how it relates to their own spiritual and religious beliefs. What I've noticed in my research and personal practice is that mindfulness allows people to connect with something larger than themselves. They realize they are not separate or alone. For people who identify with a particular religious denomination, they often find their faith is deepened as a result of becoming more mindful.

Part of the reason I'm drawn to mindfulness is that it is so universally applicable that you can taste and touch and feel into the experience of being fully awake and present, while not having to label it as a spiritual experience. Yet each moment can be a spiritual experience. And we begin to live as if we weren't separate beings, but all interconnected. Through this insight, we realize that we try to live in an ethical, empathic, compassionate way, not because it is good from a moralistic or religious perspective, but because it is the only way that makes sense. It's like if you have a splinter in your right hand and your left hand pulls it out, the right hand doesn't say to the left, "Oh thank you so much, that was so compassionate of you!" It's just the appropriate response given the circumstance; it's just what you do because you're part of the same body.

As we practice mindfulness, we realize that, like this example, we are all part of the same body in this world, connected to other human beings and our environment. So the appropriate response is to take care of ourselves, to take care of each other, and to take care of the environment – we are all interconnected so this is the only thing that makes sense. As Naomi Shihab Nye put it so beautifully:

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore...*

## **What areas of inquiry need to be studied further in order to expand current research in related areas?**

I hope that further research on mindfulness will explore *how* these practices are beneficial and helpful to individuals. We need to consider what is actually happening, what are the mechanisms of action. I also think it is important to consider the positive effects of mindfulness, instead of focusing on decreasing pathology, through a paradigm shift by looking at the positive aspects of practicing mindfulness. Does it increase happiness, generosity, gratitude, and compassion?

Finally, I would like to continue exploring the profound applications for mindfulness in our educational system. I believe the skills that mindfulness offers are beneficial to the whole person at any age, helping to enhance skills important in academic education, e.g. concentration, cognitive flexibility, attention, as well as skills important for life, e.g. emotional and social intelligence, empathy, self-awareness. I believe mindfulness offers the potential to transform education so that we are truly educating the *whole* person.

Now that I am a mother (my son Jackson is almost 3!), I have become much more interested in what we are teaching our children. I see how open and curious his mind is, how he is so flexible and eager to learn. We have an amazing opportunity to teach our children how to live with an open heart and a wise mind. As Hafiz said, "If habits are human nature, why not cultivate habits that mint gold?" Where we focus our attention determines what we cultivate. We have a profound opportunity to guide our children, our students, and ourselves in the art of training our minds and hearts, cultivating awareness, compassion, generosity, respect, and reverence for life in all its different manifestations.

**Thank you very much for sharing your insights and research with me and with our readers.**

*Shauna L. Shapiro is an assistant professor of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University. Her focal area of interest is mindfulness meditation, which led her to study in Thailand and Nepal, as well as in the West with teachers including Jack Kornfield, Roger Walsh, Shinzen Young, Sylvia Boorstein, and Alan Wallace. She further trained in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) at the University of Massachusetts with Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues. Dr. Shapiro's research has focused on examining the effects of mindfulness across a range of clinical populations, including persons with cancer, substance abuse, insomnia, depression and anxiety. A current area of interest is integrating mindfulness into higher education, specifically into psychology and health care. She is a recent recipient of the Contemplative Mind and Society fellowship and developed a graduate psychology course titled "Mindfulness and Psychology: Theory, Research and Practice." Dr. Shapiro has published over three dozen articles and book chapters in the area of meditation and mindfulness, presenting her work nationally and internationally.*

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