

Mindfulness¹ as a Path of Women's Empowerment

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Abstract

The paper brings together social mindfulness as a path of empowerment for women within its concept of the interrelatedness of all beings in the web of life. The paradigm of social mindfulness is thus established as the foundation of feminist spirituality. The focus of this work is on the possibility of applying the ethics of mindfulness as a paradigm to interpersonal interrelatedness. The relations among humans, nature, reason and emotion in self-development are confronted with the paradigm of mindfulness. This paper carries out a theoretical analysis of the possibility of integrating the paradigm of mindfulness with the paradigm of feminist spirituality. In this view, the paradigm shift toward integrating spiritual and social justice and ecological balance is examined. It also examines possibility of transformation of negative gender stereotypes with the help of mindfulness, loving kindness, compassion and ethics. From this point of view, the application of mindfulness in education (especially childhood, primary and secondary schools) is considered.

Keywords: mindfulness, women, empowerment, social justice, interconnectedness.

Izveček

Pričujoči članek poskuša združiti pot pozornosti, čuječnosti in pot opolnomočenja žensk v okviru paradigme družbene čuječnosti, ki je predlagana kot temeljni kamen eko-feministične duhovnosti. Skupna nit obeh je v etiki pozornosti kot paradigmi medsebojne povezanosti, katere cilj je preseganje okov, ki posameznika in posameznico zapirajo v mrežo iluzije in (negativnih vrednostnih) sodb, in ki gradi na zavesti neškodovanja ter razvijanju ljubeče dobrote in sočutja do vseh bitij (človeških in nečloveških ter tudi do narave). Glavni fokus prispevka je teoretična analiza možnosti povezovanja paradigme čuječnosti s paradigmo eko-feministične duhovnosti. Prav tako je preučena možnost preoblikovanja negativnih spolnih stereotipov s pomočjo kultiviranja meditativne prakse čuječnosti.

Gljučne besede: čuječnost, ženska, opolnomočenje, družbena pravičnost, medsebojna soodvisnost.

1 The path of mindfulness or attentiveness, according to Primož Pečenko is a method of mindfulness, therefore, a form of meditation, a spiritual path that follows the old Buddhist traditions and is a therapeutic tool, one that is successfully introduced and integrated into new social environment (Pečenko 2014, 7).

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To be attached to one view
and to look down upon other views as inferior,
this the wise man calls a fetter. (*Sutta nipata*)

(Patridge 2009, 195)

Introduction

This paper attempts to combine the path of mindfulness and that of women's empowerment in the context of the social mindfulness paradigm, which will be proposed as a cornerstone of eco-feminist spirituality. The common denominator of the two will be merged into the ethics of attentiveness as a paradigm of interconnectedness, with the aim of overcoming the fetters that chain an individual to a set of illusions and (negative value) judgments, and which stems from the awareness of harmlessness, developing loving kindness and compassion for all beings (human and non-human, as well as human and nature as a whole). The main focus of this paper is a theoretical analysis of all the possibilities that show how the paradigms of mindfulness and eco-feminist spirituality can be connected. The article will also examine the possibility of transforming negative gender stereotypes by means of cultivating the practice of mindfulness meditation.

Before further confronting the paradigm of mindfulness with that of eco-feminist spirituality, the term empowerment needs to be discussed. Empowerment is a term that denotes different forms of liberation. This is not only external liberation of the oppressed from the yoke of the oppressor, but also a liberation of complete human development. The word empowerment, therefore, describes an integrated life-long process of individual development, so that a person can transform all external conditions and express his / her own "detached essence" in all its potentials. It is a process in which an individual self-realizes him- or herself, and thus fulfills his or her role within the community and society as a whole, as well as empowering others.

The path of mindfulness and attentiveness will in this context be understood and presented as a universal trans-confessional or inter-(sur-)religious paradigm and a platform of eco-feminist spirituality—as a path of empowering an individual woman or man.

Ecological Egalitarianism and Religious Eco-feminism

In the last decade of the twentieth century, all major world religions started to contend with the possible damage that their traditions had caused to the

understanding of the environment, of nature and nonhuman beings, and began searching in their customs for positive elements to achieve an ecologically validating spirituality and everyday practice. In their third development phase, feminist critics thus expanded their discussions of determinate theologies in relation to their attitudes towards nature and nonhuman beings. Thus the various ecofeminisms or ecofeminist theologies critically question the correlation between gender hierarchies in an individual religion and culture, and the hierarchical establishment of the value of man above that of nature. All types of theological ecofeminism thus strive for a deconstruction of the patriarchal paradigm, its hierarchical structure, methodology and thought. They try to deconstruct the entire paradigm of men's supremacy over women, of mind over body, Heaven over Earth, of the transcendent over the immanent, and of the male God, alienated and ruling over all Creation, and replace all this with new alternatives. All major world religions are in this sense challenged to self-questioning and self-criticism in their judgement of the possible negative patterns that contribute to the destruction of the environment, and to restoring environmentally-friendly traditions. From an ecofeminist and environmentally fair perspective, it is essential that religions do away with the negative, stereotypes and prejudices which strengthen both domination over nature and various forms of social domination (Radford Ruether 2005, XI). The Christian tradition, for instance, has (from an ecofeminist point of view) contributed several problematic images and symbols that have consolidated and survived in form of negative gender stereotypes and prejudices, and taken root in the legacy of the Western philosophical-religious thought (Furlan Štante 2012, 108).

Ecological feminism or ecofeminism is a feminist perspective based on the premise that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are two interconnected phenomena, and two categories that are subjugated and discriminated against by the patriarchal system. Essentially, ecofeminism is based on the premise that what leads to the oppression of women and to the exploitation of nature is one and the same thing: the patriarchal system, dualistic thinking, the system of dominance, and global capitalism. The common denominator of all forms of violence is the patriarchal system, understood as a source of violence. Ecofeminism thus experiences the patriarchal system as a conflictual one building on an exploitative hierarchical relationship, unaware of the equality, unity and connectedness of all living beings in the space of life. This is the reason why the patriarchal system is ruining the harmonic connections between men and women, as well as man and nature, having destructive effects on all of these.

For ecofeminists, the awareness of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all human and nonhuman beings, nature, environment, and so on. sets ecocentric

egalitarianism as the fundamental starting point of the ethics of interpersonal relationships. Within the context of theological ecofeminism, the individual's identity is faced with a model of the fundamental interconnection of all beings in the web of life. The awareness of this, of the consequent interdependence and joint responsibility in the ethical-moral sense, thus represents the next step in the evolution of interpersonal relationships and all relations within the web of life. The conceptualization of women's identity and the identity of an individual in postmodernity, through the perspective of theological ecofeminism, sets, above all, an ethical imperative of responsibility that the awareness of this fundamental interconnection presupposes.

Here the attempt at separating the human from the cosmic entirety does not entail autonomy and individuality, but illusion. The individuality of a human being is understood from the perspective of the connectedness of individuals into a whole. A single person as an individual is immersed in this entirety, is part of it and at the same time autonomous. His or her autonomy should be reflected in reciprocal responsibility and respect for the integrity of an individual, of the other, of the different. Critically, the ethical goal of theological ecofeminism is therefore to improve the quality of relationships.

Changing the patriarchal paradigm to an ecofeminist one starts with epistemology, with transforming the way one thinks. Patriarchal epistemology bases itself on eternal unchangeable "truths" that are the presuppositions for knowing what truly "is". In the Platonic-Aristotelian epistemology that shaped Catholic Christianity, this epistemology takes the form of eternal ideas that exist *a priori*, of which physical things are pale and partial expressions. Catholicism added to this the hierarchy of revelation over reason; revealed ideas come directly from God, and thus are unchangeable and unquestionable in comparison to ideas derived from reason (Gebara 1999, 29).

In this context, dualism represents the attitude of separation and domination, which is written and naturalized in a culture and characterized with a radical exclusion, distance and opposition between areas that have been systematically established as lower and higher, inferior and superior, the ruled and the ruling. This binarism is also the nature of Cartesian dualism. The spirit which has a dominant position is always elevated above the body, it is superior and ruling, whereas the body is not only an inferior machine, but is also dominated by the spirit. Descartes' dualism represents such a "natural" hierarchical structure that is found in the binary oppositions of nature and culture. In this context, the dualism of body and mind is a strong mental paradigm, which in turn determines and shapes all aspects of everyday reality in Western culture. It is the naturalization

of this hierarchy which has shaped the mental paradigm of hierarchical duality in Western society since the Enlightenment onwards, and is an excellent breeding ground for the toxic relationships that are being set up along the hierarchy of views regarding gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, culture, class, religion, economy and social affiliation.

Modern society is experiencing a crisis regarding the traditional dualism, but in certain crucial elements this dualism is still maintained, as it is reproduced through science, popular culture, and religion.

Acceptance of linear time and one-way evolution in culture are a good basis for the reproduction and conservation of the Enlightenment paradigm of hierarchical dualism and hierarchical relationships. Therefore, all Western culture is caught up in the illusion of different hierarchical dualisms that separate and legitimize the domination of one thing over another.

The Cartesian dualistic paradigm has also reproduced and created a number of traditional hierarchies, legalised them and rooted them in Western culture under the disguise of universal natural traditionalism. Hand in hand with the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, the Carthusian dualistic paradigm has promoted the stigma and prejudices associated with the supposed inferiority of both women and nature.

Under the influence of this Cartesian dualistic paradigm, people's imperialist attitudes towards animals, plants, the environment and nature has strengthened the hierarchical perspective which sees the supremacy of the substantial (human: lord) over the so-called non-substantial (nature, animals, plants: objectified and without intrinsic value). Similarly, the paradigm of the individual's separation from entirety is reflected in the separation of humans from nature. A model of a human, in the role of a superior master who has completely objectified nature, and serves as the "crown of creation", possesses nature, ruthlessly exploiting natural resources, ravaging and abusing them, has become an exemplary model of the relationship between humanity and nature. By dispossessing nature of its intrinsic value, the human-nature relationship is mechanistically and objectifiedly lost.

This has led to the dominance of reason over emotions, body over spirit, man over nature, men over women, and masculinity over femininity. The hierarchy and struggle between these dualisms occurs both in every individual and at the level of male-female relationships, as well as on a broader social and religious level. Prejudices and stereotypes that often distort the image of the human personality are contrary to the logic of compassion and love that accepts a man as he is and, in particular, allows him to achieve empowerment. Numerous negative gender

stereotypes and prejudices are a product of the socio-religious influences and relationship games of (pre)dominance between the genders. They are thus a supplement of social gender, the Cartesian mechanistic image of nature which fades away in the light of love and compassion. Distorted pictures and labels are created, characterizing the other and returning it to us in a mirror image, thus marking and defining ourselves. The hierarchical supremacy in this is thus perceived as a cause of violence between the genders, man and nature, different cultures, religions, and so on, which needs to be replaced with the logic of love.

In its essence, eco-feminist theology brings in the ethics of ecological egalitarianism which is based on the theology of peace and non-violence. Instead of patriarchal androcentrism and matriarchal utopianism, it focuses on cosmic, ecological organic egalitarianism (i.e., cosmic ecological egalitarianity) (Furlan Štante 2014, 24–28).

The Path of Mindfulness as a Way of Empowering an Individual

The process of ethical empowerment of an individual is an internal one that might be called an “inner ecology”. In the process of surpassing intolerance and transforming negative (gender) stereotypes, it is essential to eradicate the hidden logic of domination and oppression. It is therefore necessary to change the paradigm of thought, and, consequently, to raise awareness.

From this perspective, it is especially important to introduce the meditative practice of mindfulness into education systems (especially in childhood, in primary and secondary schools). The use and deployment of mindfulness practice in teaching and pedagogical practice certainly contributes to the transformation of the hidden logic of domination and oppression.

In his criticism of the “hidden curriculum” in traditional education, Peter McLaren notes that this “represents much more than just a study program, a text that is read in class or a curriculum”, as it is also “an introduction to a particular form of life to prepare the students for either dominant or inferior positions determined in the existing society” (McLaren 1989, 183). In order to realise such social positioning, certain forms of knowledge are preferred over others; “the hidden curriculum” thus confirms the dreams, hopes and values of selected groups of students that are favoured and superior over others, and introduces a discriminatory practice based on race, class and gender. Such reproduction of the hidden “logic of domination” is a conceptual diagram of the opposing and exclusive binarisms or dualisms, supported by the assumption of relative values and qualifications which serve to establish and legalise social patterns of domination and oppression.

“The hidden curriculum” both reproduces and maintains the logic of the dualistic view of the world, which is the ideological basis for the institutionalized construction of sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination.

Teaching practice, which is trapped within the restraints of the logic of dualisms and emphasizes the supremacy of reason over emotion, body over spirit, cannot be successful in creating the conditions necessary for internal transformation of students or pupils. It is the latter that, according to Peter McLaren, presents a key objective of critical pedagogy, as it marks the body, the emotions, the mind and the conceptualization of an individual’s identity and that of another.

Deborah Orr understands the learning process in a holistic context, namely, that learning takes place not only in mind, but at all levels of one’s own being. It is therefore proposed that the practice of teaching mindfulness or the path of attentiveness, developed by the Buddhist tradition to overcome the dualistic concept of the world, is included in critical pedagogy. The skill of mindfulness is extremely effective in the process of transforming discriminatory ideologies and the practices of students and pupils, as this promotes changes not only on the intellectual level of the students’ learning, but also at the level of the body, emotions and mind, namely, where the most covert and persistent forms of oppression and discrimination are formed and maintained (Orr 2002, 328).

In the light of the attitude of marginalization and subordination of women and nature by the patriarchal system, ecofeminism is critical of the hierarchical evaluation and the formation of certain dualisms: culture / nature; male / female; myself / others; intelligence / emotion; man / animal. As stated in ecofeminist theory, nature is dominated by culture; women by men; emotion by intellect; animals by humans. This hierarchical structure of relationships is further commanded and constructed by the patriarchal system. Surpassing and transforming the dichotomy of the intellect and body is essential in the creation of non-discriminatory discourse and pedagogy.

The path of mindfulness as a form of Buddhist meditation has evolved, developed and been refined through the millennia in order to help practitioners cope with their mistakes, illusions and delusions which were a result of misuse or misunderstanding of language and artificially created dichotomies, or the above described dualisms. The teachers of non-discriminatory practices find a particular importance in the insight that people uncritically absorb binarily constructed concepts of self, gender, race and so on, both identifying with these and identifying others with them.

As shown by the various traditions of meditation, cultivation of the related skills can eliminate attachments to certain ideas that structure and poison human life.

Through meditation we directly and intentionally confront all manifestations of reality on all levels of experience. This confrontation is carried out through the meditation technique of practicing attentiveness (*sati*), where, in particular, it is important to be attentive here and now, “a particular way of observation, to be attentive ... which consequently leads to experiencing attention at this moment and the state of consciousness that does not judge and does not condemn”. (Kabat-Zinn 2000, 230)

This state of consciousness, once achieved, empowers one to decide not only to refuse oppressive and discriminatory views, but also to begin practicing these decisions in all areas of one's life.

By using the technique of cultivating attention, a male student can get “infected” with the ideology of male superiority, and gradually, he can achieve an insight and identify even the subtlest manifestations of sexism and ultra masculinity in his living environment, and thus gradually transforms or changes them. Similarly, feminist-oriented scientists believe that the meditation technique of attentiveness helps women to become empowered and accept themselves as they are, thus resisting all violent forms of patriarchal oppression and the artificially established norms of the beauty industry (Kaplan 1997, 240).

With regard to the path of attentiveness, mindfulness, and *sati*, *Vipassana* meditation is one of the many forms which can be found both in traditional and modern Buddhist practices. It can be seen as an indispensable foundation for ethical and spiritual development, which gives us a deeper insight into the structure of human consciousness and its potential. It comprises the fundamental dimensions and depths of questions related to ethics, spiritual growth, the development of kindness, love and compassion, and all the other objectives of the Buddhist traditions, which the modern world should re-examine and develop. Moreover, its nature is universal and trans-religious, and although it derives from a Buddhist context it is not an ideology or a doctrine. (Orr 2002, 362)

The meditation (of loving kindness) called *sati* is therefore a path that can serve as a bridge over the socially constructed gaps between mind and body, emotions and spirit, ideas and life, and beyond the illusions of the self, self-image and the images of others. It thus takes us beyond what the classical educational curriculum and teaching practice are able to achieve. The path of attentiveness or *sati* is a meditation technique which aims to cultivate mindfulness, and so attentiveness to the present moment, in order to raise awareness and empower an individual. It includes the ability of individuals to detect and observe their own thoughts. Mindful individuals therefore maintain an impartial distance from their thoughts (Kabat-Zinn 1990, 77). This form of meditation is thus an indispensable foundation for the ethical and spiritual development of an individual.

Nicole E. Ruedy and Maurice E. Schweitzer note that there are two ways in which loving kindness meditation cultivates more ethical decisions. Firstly, loving kindness is closely linked to the cultivation of greater sensitivity and awareness of one's own environment. Such attentive awareness is without judgement, it is non-reactive and allows for the observation and recognition of our harmful thoughts with a distance of non-violence and non-reactivity (2010, 76). It has also been proven that this practice increases emotional acceptance (Segal et al. 2002) and increases one's readiness to tolerate unpleasant emotions and feelings (Eifert and Heffner 2003; Levit et al. 2004). In principle, those who practice loving kindness meditation are typically less ignorant, more compassionate and non-violent. This is also where their ethical stance and moral conscience emerge from.

Secondly, loving kindness stimulates self-awareness, and greater self-awareness reduces unethical behaviour. Empirical research suggests that people who are more confident are also more honest (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2010, 76).

The ground-breaking study conducted by Sarah Lazar, which analyzed the effects of regular loving kindness meditation in men and women, who on average practiced 40 minutes of *Vipassana* meditation per day, shows that this is linked to structural changes in the areas of the brain that are important for sensory, cognitive and emotional processes (Lazar 2005, 1896). Daniel Siegel claims that loving kindness meditation is a form of internal consistency, and this is necessary for achieving internal harmony and harmony with the others. Loving kindness and empathy meet, both being oriented to each other, as each stimulates and strengthens the other. In this light, loving kindness meditation can be understood as a skill, path and method of cultivating compassion and empathy, including compassion and empathy for oneself (Siegel 2007, 164).

It should be noted that in Buddhist philosophy "a skill" needs to be understood differently than in the Western understanding of the word, which refers to "how to do something". In the practice of loving kindness, the ability of cultivating all that leads to love and a greater awareness of our fundamental interconnectedness is understood as a skill. In this context, we are therefore unskilled when we are ignorant or when we fall into a state of mind and behaviour which reinforces the wrong sense of separateness, which in turn leads to suffering. (Kornfield 1993, 13)

In Buddhism, whoever studies the meditative practice of loving kindness or mindfulness cultivates love and awareness with the help of one of the four *Brahma Viharas*, which include loving kindness (*Metta* in Pāli), compassion (*Karuna*), empathic joy (*Mudita*) and indifference (*Uppekha*) (ibid., 40). *Metta* practice (loving kindness) is a way of cultivating empathy and responding wisely to situations. Sharon Salzberg explains that the Pāli word *Metta* has its roots in

two meanings, delicate and friend, and thus expresses sincere benevolence in the present moment. Therefore, through *Metta* practice we develop the capabilities of our hearts to be present here and now, without emotional and mental judgments. However, we must consider at this point that Buddhist tradition does not distinguish between thoughts and emotions, or between heart and mind, but refers to both as *chitta*, which is both heart / mind (Salzberg 2002, 33). This is also the way or path of cultivating relationships with one another—with the help of awakening empathy.

P.R. Fulton also arrives at a similar conclusion, stating that compassion for others emerges from the recognition that we are all interconnected and faced with suffering, in the Buddhist context this is a true understanding of the world, and everyone wants to liberate themselves from this. Mindfulness, or the path of attentiveness, can thus take us beyond being trapped in the artificial constructs that otherwise define our separation, to reach an experience of inner connection with all beings in the network of life. Compassion and empathy toward others consequently become natural expressions of the awareness of our fundamental mutual interaction or integration. (Fulton 2005, 54)

Conscious embodiment, therefore, means the integrity of the heart / mind, body and performance accompanied by awareness of the nature of such connections in the broader social context. As such, conscious embodiment or mindful operation is a mere awareness of how traditional social networking practices (co-)create an individual, and how they consequently affect our reflections and understanding of the distribution of power and our activities.

From a Buddhist perspective, the contemporary fascination with the idea of difference reflects an intellectual history that did not know or recognize the idea of the fundamental interconnectedness of people, events or phenomena (Klein 1995, 124).

What is important for the Buddhist understanding of subjectivity is the mental condition known as mindfulness—the ability to maintain clear and stable focus on the selected object. Mindfulness in this context corresponds to both essentialist and constructivist feminist views, as well as the postmodern sensibility toward others, which, as such, recognizes the paths of creating awareness of oneself and others. The more an individual cultivates mindfulness, the more focused he / she is on current experience, and the clearer his / her ideas are about the fragility and questionable nature of the constructed human self.

In this context, mindfulness offers an ethical theory which is not focused on the binary negation of another, although it develops on top of the awareness of the fundamental connection and interdependence of all beings. This represents a code

of ethics and the moral commitment of an observant, mindful individual, and, as such, goes beyond the boundaries of religions.

Conclusion

Being aware of the basic connection, and therefore interdependence and co-responsibility of all beings in an ethical and moral sense, is the next step in the evolution of interpersonal and all other relations in the web of life. Mindfulness or the path of attentiveness can in this context be understood as the possibility of creating a new trans-religious paradigm of peace as a transformation of internal and external conflict into a more sustainable mode of non-violence. Namely, each moment of attentive awareness excludes violence and strengthens the awareness of the fundamental connections with and resulting acknowledgement of others.

We can thus say that mindfulness is all about a change in or raising awareness. Even in the light of eco-feminist spirituality, *metanoia* or the change of awareness in consciousness is an urgent “action” which begins with an individual, and it is here that mindfulness meditation can play a key role in improving things.

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