As noted above, Ellen Langer, Amanda Le, and Christelle Ngnoumen have recently edited a two volume handbook comparing and integrating Eastern and Western approaches (The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Mindfulness, 2014). In the opening chapter, James Carmody of the University of Massachusetts reflects upon the similarities, differences, and clinical implications of Eastern and Western approaches to mindfulness. He notes three streams of approaches: 1. The Buddhist-derived approach popularized by Jon Kabat-Zinn, and taught in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). 2. Approaches integrating cognitive therapy with mindfulness, but not based in sitting meditation. These include Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), in which practitioners are encouraged to witness and accept changing states of mind and body. 3. The approach developed by Ellen Langer, which sees mindfulness as “the desired end-result of an open and curious orientation to the environment.”¹

Buddhist approaches to mindfulness originated out of the Buddha’s aim of reducing mental suffering. Western clinicians, too, aim to reduce suffering, and Western clinicians have drawn together Western definitions from both traditional and contemporary constructs. We mentioned above some of Kabat-Zinn’s working definitions, such as “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” A group of Canadian clinicians in 2004 (Bishop, Law, Shapiro, Carlson, Anderson, Carmody, Segal, Abbey, Speca, Velting, and Devins) created a consensus on an operational definition that has two components:

The first component involves the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, thereby allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment. The second component involves adopting a particular orientation toward one’s experience in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance.²

Mindfulness begins by regulating the focus of one’s attention, observing and attending to one’s changing thoughts, feelings and sensations, moment by moment. Practitioners report that this leads to an
experience of alertness and attentiveness to what is occurring and a feeling of being fully present and alive in the moment. Practices such as watching the breath develop the capacity for sustained attention, so that one can maintain one’s focus on whatever is occurring in the present moment of experience. A related skill is the switching of attention, so that one can return attention to the breath or the present moment when one’s attention strays. This of course can be a crucial skill in today’s world, when multi-tasking has taken a great toll on our ability to focus attention; it can also teach us to cultivate the capacity to redirect mental distress to more effective, harmonious thoughts.

Thus these practices teach one to be aware of thoughts, feelings, and sensations without getting caught up in elaborative streams of thought about one’s experience, telling oneself a story about the origin and implications of whatever one happens to be experiencing in the moment. One learns to attend to the present experience in its simplicity, without elaborative thought or judgment. If thoughts arise, one does not suppress them, but simply returns to the breath, a practice that can forestall the stream of elaborate story telling our minds are wont to engage in. And since we have limited resources of attention, the less we engage in elaboration, the more attention we have available for taking in information in our present moment of experience, without the filter of pre-conceived assumptions, expectations, and desires. Thus we have more cognitive resources to create a rich experience of reality.

The second component of this consensus definition of mindfulness points to an orientation toward experience that involves curiosity and acceptance rather than judgment. The goal is not necessarily to produce a certain experience, such as relaxation, but rather to be open and receptive to the reality of the present moment, to allow one’s experience to be as it is. One therapeutic goal of the mindful stance is to be able to develop greater tolerance for emotional distress. Another is to be able to distinguish emotions from bodily sensations, which would also allow one to develop greater awareness and understanding of emotions. A related ability is to experience thoughts and feelings as passing mental events, rather than as permanent, ingrained aspects of oneself or as genuine reflections of reality.

We have seen that classic Buddhist teachings emphasize two dimensions to meditation training: the development of calm (samādhi) and insight (vipassana). Thus far we have emphasized the aspect of
mindfulness meditation that brings insight into the nature of mental events. Focus on the breath, which is an arousal-neutral object of mental awareness, can create a calm mental state that is available for access at any time. Focus on the realm of sensation, in contrast to thoughts and emotions, has the advantage that it is the most easily recognized of the three types of internal events, and that it is the realm in which we can most acutely experience delight. By learning to maintain focus on the realm of sensation, one can steer attention away from the mind’s tendency to judge and compare present experience with imagined other experiences. For example, we have noted above that practitioners can use the body-scan, in which one extends bringing attention to the breath to the entire body. Thus the practitioner learns to notice whatever sensations are present in each part of the body, and to notice the difference between sensations, the feeling tone associated with them (pleasant/unpleasant/neutral); and any cognitive commentary (I like this; I don’t like this; I shouldn’t be experiencing this; I’m glad to have this sensation). One can thus learn to maintain psychological distance between ourselves and our thoughts and sensations (“this is a thought; this is a sensation, attached to a pleasant emotion and a positive judgment.”)

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iii Bishop et al, 232.


v Carmody suggests that the most salient difference between the Eastern based approaches and the Western approach developed by Ellen Langer is that while Eastern approaches are oriented toward the pure process of experience, Langer’s approach does focus upon a desired goal, what he terms “the lived end-point of being more mindful.” By continually creating new categories and distinctions, one can approach situations with curiosity and cognitive flexibility, seeing novelty and being open to new information. Thus nursing home residents showed increases in creativity, attending and learning. However, we should note that mindfulness researchers also measure outcome goals, such as increased ability to sustain attention on the present moment and shift from task to task.