

# Empowering Spiritual Human-Nature Relationship through Mindfulness Pedagogical Paths

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## **Abstract**

*This study emphasises the need to empower spirituality within the framework of environmental education, and demonstrate its value as a vital component in the human-nature relationship. This is proposed through utilizing the meaning, content and practice of mindfulness. The examination of mindfulness, as a pedagogical philosophy as well as methodology, contributes to the relief of our disconnectedness as humans from nonhuman nature, and to the creation of a harmonious relationship with the nonhuman world. Thus emerge three pedagogical paths: slowing down from the frenetic rhythms of our everyday lives in contemporary high-tech societies and promoting mindful connection with nature; mindful eating, and cultivation of empathy for the Earth as well as all living creatures. Mindfulness has the potential to play an essential role in the empowerment of ecological consciousness, based on the principles of coexistence and solidarity between human and nonhuman beings. This empowers the development of a sensorial and spiritual human/nature bond, and an embodied empathy for all living creatures, developing feelings of compassion for all of Earth's inhabitants, as well as humility and gratitude towards the more-than-human world.*

## **Résumé**

*La présente étude plaide en faveur de la spiritualité en éducation à l'environnement et démontre son importance vitale dans la relation qu'entretiennent les êtres humains avec la nature. Pour ce faire, l'étude propose d'aborder la spiritualité par le biais de la pratique de l'attention consciente (pleine présence); son sens, ses fondements et sa pratique. La présente analyse de l'attention consciente comme philosophie pédagogique et outil méthodologique souligne sa capacité à rapprocher les êtres humains de la nature non humaine et à rétablir une relation harmonieuse entre êtres vivants. Cette démarche pédagogique se divise en trois objectifs : ralentir le rythme et interagir en conscience avec la nature; s'alimenter de manière consciente; et cultiver de l'empathie envers la Terre et toutes ses formes de vie. En l'ancrant dans des principes de coexistence et de solidarité entre êtres humains et non humains, l'attention consciente a le potentiel prometteur de développer la conscience écologique. Elle soutient l'importance pour les humains de tisser des liens sensoriels et spirituels avec la nature, et de développer des sentiments d'empathie, de compassion, d'humilité et de gratitude envers toutes les espèces de la Terre, au-delà du monde humain.*

**Key-words:** mindfulness, human-nature connection, ecological consciousness, environmental education, spirituality

**Mots-clés :** attention consciente, pleine présence, relation entre humains et nature, conscience écologique, éducation à l'environnement, spiritualité

## Introduction

It is now acknowledged that the global ecological crisis threatens not only the natural equilibrium of the planet, but also our physical and spiritual existence. It is a crisis of human feeling, our spiritual existence, and a threat to our entire mode of sensibility (Bonnett, 2007). Western civilisation is now beginning to realise that the ecological crisis arises from a split consciousness separating mind from body and self from the world (Bai & Scutt, 2009). Beginning from the decline of the human/nature relationship by Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Lenoir, 2018), the hyper-separation of self/world and nature/culture is responsible for the instrumentalist treatment of the natural world (Naess, 1988; Latour, 2004).

There is an increasing number of voices that underline the separation of modern societies from nature, and the important consequences this estrangement effects on the spiritual development of human beings (Driver, et al., 1996; Kaza & Kraft, 2000; Kellert & Farnham, 2002). Sandell & Öhman (2010) argue that education for sustainable development may be further developed by adding a fourth dimension that is not ecological, economic, or social, “but is rather a comprehensive existential perspective that originates from aesthetic and emotional relations with nature – the direct encounter with nature” (p. 125).

The presumed separation of humanity from the natural world may have offered benefits to technology and science, but it has also deprived us of instinctual connections to the spiritual domains of life — the connection between the human soul and the soul of the world, as well as sense and belief that we are all in and of the world — interconnected as human and nonhuman (Vaughan-Lee, 2013). Kumar (2004, 2008) highlights the underestimation of the spiritual dimension of human beings, along with all living creatures and natural elements that comprise a modern material, competitive, and alienated world, where human beings are considered the superior species, and nature a resource to be possessed and exploited to satisfy human needs. Spirituality includes an experienced based form of insight, based on inner-attention, bodily experience and consciousness. It is an epistemic stance where the knowledge does not manifest as theory that can be communicated through language but can be demonstrated through spiritual practice. Spirituality involves insight and ethics (Metzinger, 2013).

The fact that the spiritual dimension in the human/nature relationship has again become timely reflects a modern trend in ecological thought — that of

spiritual ecology. This transdisciplinary study combines ecology with spirituality, and identifies the absence of the spiritual dimension in the human/nature relationship as a central cause of ecological crisis. Spiritual ecology includes a variety of perspectives, from Buddhist, to Christian, to secular spirituality, as well as native American, Indian, Persian and Sufi traditions, all commonly based on a need to emphasise spiritual development in harmony with nature, against the modern materialistic and consumerist society (Gottlieb, 2004; Vaughan-Lee, 2013).

Many authors have approached spirituality as a dimension of the human/nature relationship. Kumar (2004) approaches spirituality as liberation from the ego identity, as a praxis of compassion and caring, promoting consciousness of interconnection and sharing with all human and nonhuman creatures, to companion the matter of the Earth. Ashley (2007) has defined wilderness spirituality as:

A feeling of connection and interrelationship with other people and nature; a heightened sense of awareness and elevated consciousness beyond the everyday and corporeal world; cognitive and affective dimensions of human understandings embracing peace, tranquillity, harmony, happiness, awe, wonder, and humbleness; and the possible presence of religious meaning and explanation (p. 65).

As spirituality emerged in the field of ecological thought, it was also introduced in the field of education (Carr & Haldane, 2003; London, 2016; Miller, 2000; Wright, 2000). There is evidence to support how children's spiritual development has the potential to significantly enrich and strengthen positive human development (Benson, et al., 2003). According to Wilson (2017):

While spirituality and education are seldom linked in discussions about the role of schools in our society, the failure to include the spiritual development of children as an educational goal does a great disservice to our children. If the focus of education is on the development of the whole child (rather than just the intellect), the spiritual dimension of our humanness must be addressed. It is a serious fallacy to think that young children are not ready for spiritual growth or that they do not have spiritual experiences (p. 5).

Within the framework of the pedagogical process, Bellous and Csinos (2009) define spirituality as a sense of felt connection, a concept that grounds the capacity to make meaning and to live a meaningful life, through words, emotions, symbols and actions. Spirituality, in the context of education, is presented as a worldview that includes a belief of the sacred as essential to human nature, beyond material reality. It is a process of internal development, and an opening to the transcendent, nonmaterial dimension of our human existence (Snauwaert & Kane, 2000).

Even without extensive literature to support these principles, some voices that raise the issue of spirituality in environmental education reveal the

potential further research on the field holds (for example, see Hitzhusen, 2005; Skamp, 1991; Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, Volumes 11 & 12). Thathong (2012) approaches spirituality in environmental education from a Buddhist perspective, and argues that environmental protection strategies must pay special attention to the psychological dimension of human nature, while promoting harmonious living between all living creatures as well as the environment. Additionally, environmental education can foster environmentally-friendly values such as selflessness, thriftiness, love and kindness, social responsibility, and compassion within the framework of a nurturing spiritual relationship between humankind and the environment. Jirasék, et al. (2017) suggests how spirituality can be integrated with environmental education to find alternative ways to empower the human/nature bond, and develop an ecological consciousness independent of the rational and the scientific.

This paper examines the pedagogical dimension that can be developed through the human/nature connection. It proposes how connection between human and nonhuman nature can play a vital role in empowering spiritual development (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Schein, 2014). The potential benefits to be gained through engagement with, and connection to, the spiritual dimension, and associated with nonhuman nature are examined. As a part of the human/nature - connection, within the framework of environmental education, spirituality can be approached through the meaning, content, and practice of mindfulness, much as it has been featured and implemented in other disciplines of Western science, art, and pedagogy. The potential of mindfulness practice in environmental education is discussed, analysing what is a promising, alternative view to develop an internal, existential human/nature bond.

Mindfulness, according to Kabat-Zinn (2016), is an awareness cultivated by paying attention to one's purpose, living in the present moment, and remaining non-judgemental of others. Mindfulness promotes maintaining a relationship based on love with the beauty of our own heart, body, and mind, and extend that to engagement with the world, life, reality, and the imagination. According to Zen master Hanh (2013), mindfulness is the continuous practice of touching each moment in daily life with depth. To be mindful is to be present with the body, as well as the mind, and to find unity between intention and action, in order to be in harmony with the surrounding world. Mindfulness helps us recognise what is going on around us as human beings living in the present moment. To breathe in mindfully, is to be aware of our in-breath. Being present in the here and the now through mindfulness is to help a person enjoy the wonders of life, which have the potential to heal, transform, and nourish us, body and mind. Meditation, as a mindfulness practice, is often used as a means for self-improvement, improving quality of life, and addressing problems associated with living in the Western world (McMahan, 2008).

Research into mindfulness within the context of pedagogy (Adarkar & Keiser, 2007; Bai, 2001; Ergas, 2019b; Hoyt, 2016; Hyde & LaPrad, 2015; Simmer-Brown

& Grace, 2011) has looked into its value as a method of stress reduction, and a way to promote the well-being of students and educators, in addition to the holistic development of students and improving their cooperation within the classroom (e.g., Accardo, 2017; Bliss, 2017; Brown, 2017; Ergas, 2019; Grant, 2017; Hartigan, 2017; Kielty et al., 2017; Moreno, 2017; Routhier-Martin et al., 2017; Trube, 2017). Taking into account all the above issues and dimensions, it would be worth investigating if and how mindfulness can contribute to the formation of a holistic approach to environmental education by adding to pedagogical theory and practice an element that has not yet been particularly studied: that of students' spiritual relationship with nature.

### Mindfulness in Environmental Education

An essential part to the aims and discourse in current environmental education is the worldwide discussion that has emerged surrounding the current generation's "ecophobia"—the fear of environmental problems and the natural world (Sobel, 2013) and environmental amnesia (Tai et al., 2006). Already, studies have been conducted highlighting the benefits of child/nature connection, relating the development of the body to that of the mind, in addition to an environmental consciousness (Bonnett, 2004; Bruni et al., 2017; Elliott, 2010; Ernst & Theimer, 2011; Fjortoft, 2001; O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004; Sandell & Öhman, 2010; Wells, 2000).

However, few studies have investigated these topics with regards to the spiritual dimension of a child/nature connection. Schein's (2014) research into spirituality in early childhood education highlighted the interconnectedness among nature and spiritual development, which manifests as self-awareness and dispositions of wonderment and joy, caring, kindness and empathy towards the creation of a better world. Bai & Scutt (2009) have examined the practice of Buddhist mindfulness to assist in cultivating a non-dualistic consciousness, to better connect humans with nature, and lead to more compassionate attitudes, as well as conduct, towards the other-than-human. They put forth that mindfulness should be an essential part of environmental education, and that mindfulness can contribute to the development of a better intersubjective connection with nature. Bai (2001) argues that mindfulness can be a valuable educational tool in environmental education, as it can teach how to perceive nature as a sacred order, through which an individual can participate as both friend and lover, and experience a sensorial empathy with nature and all living creatures.

Recently, the potential of mindfulness has emerged as a tool to foster the human/nature connection (Nisbet, et al., 2019). Mindfulness research has also been done within the framework of ecological consciousness as a way to empower an embodied, sensorial, and ecocentric bond to the more-than-human world (Pulki, et al., 2017; Tsevreni, 2022; Witteman, 2020).

Included within the wider field of mindfulness, are practices that include various techniques (e.g., yoga, dance, free writing, contemplative art) in order to cultivate concentration, awareness, communication, and connection (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). According to Hanh (2013), mindfulness practice can be achieved through meditation, breathing exercises, an awakening of the senses, focusing on participation through cooperation and solidarity, as well as contact with nature. There are ancient, traditional techniques of meditation based on the human/nature relationship (Fisher, 2013). Such techniques have been westernized, and adjusted to our modern societies, but have the potential to help us escape from material, consumerist culture and a way of life that can be overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of large cities, and emphasize the benefits of our reconnection with the non-human world (Coleman, 2006). Principles and techniques, based on meditation, have the potential to be used as a tool in the creation of a spiritual connection with nature, and inspire a process of self-awareness that mindfulness can offer. Further, developing mindfulness practice in the context of connection with nature can help expand a receptiveness to the natural world, quiet internal noise, improve our connection with nature, and begin to comprehend the vital role that our connection with that natural world can play in the improvement of human lives.

Based in pedagogical theory and praxis as outlined above, the practical contribution of mindfulness to the achievement of a harmonious human relationship with the natural world is examined and analyzed through three pedagogical paths: 1) slowing down from the frenetic rhythms of our everyday lives and mindful connection to nonhuman nature, 2) mindful eating, and 3) a cultivation of empathy for the Earth and all living creatures within its environment.

## Pedagogical Paths through Mindfulness

### *Slowing Down and Mindful Connection to Nonhuman Nature*

Mindfully connecting with a natural place, in whatever form, can offer multiple benefits. Finding a natural place that inspires, be it a wood, river, pond, meadow, sandy cove, particular vista, or even a tree can provide a backdrop to awaken our senses and develop a mindfulness practice to assist in forming a relationship to it. In visiting settings which inspire multiple times, at variable points during the day and different seasons of the year, allows for the opportunity to become conscious of the ecosystem itself, and for it to reveal itself. Through better understanding and knowledge, the practice of mindfulness can foster a sense of closeness to the ecosystem, and realize how we as humans are a part of it, and not the only living beings aware of its presence. Interacting mindfully with a natural location can offer an embodied, sensorial experience that and contribute to the creation of a bond with the more-than-human world (Abram, 1997; Coleman, 2006).

There are concepts of meditation with the capacity to contribute to a stronger relationship between nature, manifested in the form of the four elements: water, air, earth and fire or as nonhuman beings and entities. Coleman describes a meditation, inspired by the Buddhist tradition, that helps recognize the familiar sense of the four elements within our human body (Coleman, 2006), and proposes that this is most ideally experienced in a natural place, where an individual can be in contact with those elements. As featured by Starhawk (2005), a spiritual tradition for approaching nature based on eco-mindfulness, solidarity, and a harmonious coexistence of humans with nature, is honoured by a meditation practice grounded in the four elements of nature. The Gaia Meditations by Seed & Macy (1988), also celebrate cycles of partnership, and the intersections of water, earth, air and fire with human beings. Myers (2014) has revealed meditation as a means for connecting with the plant world and for vegetalizing our human senses. Interaction with the non-human world through various mindfulness techniques can emerge a field of reflection, contemplation and strengthening of our relationship with nature.

In our modern, technology-dominanted world, it can be argued that the value of silence, stillness, and solitude have been exchanged for a preoccupation with business, heightened stimulation, and a restless way of living, one where the mind does not have a chance to focus, or absorb the beauty of a landscape, without becoming agitated or bored. Recognizing the impact of a hurried pace in a mechanised and industrialised world, and a constant call to achieve multiple goals, can assist in observing and learning from natural cycles, and slow the patterns of frenetic rhythms which can dominate human lives, and instead reflect the rhythms of nature. The more we can move away from a conventional view of time, and connect with the value of the present a species, while following the rhythms of nature, we can be brought to an understanding of how the future can only exist in the present moment (Coleman 2006).

### *Mindful Eating*

Kabat-Zinn (2016) created the meditation of the raisin (entitled “Eating one raisin: A first taste of mindfulness”), based on an alternative experience of food to cultivate greater mindfulness around eating, and the behaviours associated with it. The challenge of Kabat-Zinn’s raisin meditation comes by way of staying in each moment as it is encountered: seeing, smelling, and the holding of the raisin, as the anticipation of eating it, chewing it slowly, focusing on its taste, and swallowing it, means observing, moment by moment, the thoughts and emotions that may arise from the exercise.

Mindfulness has the capacity to assist in staying conscious of the origins of our food, and our connection to Earth, as a species. Hanh (2016) uses everyday eating routines, such as consuming bread or tea, as a means to empower our ecological consciousness. He writes:

Bread comes from the wheat fields, from hard work, and from the baker, the supplier and the seller. But the bread is more than that. The wheat field needs clouds and sunshine. So in this slice of bread there is sunshine, there is cloud, there is the labour of the farmer, the joy of having flour, and the skill of the baker and then – miraculously!- there is the bread. The whole cosmos has come together so that this piece of bread can be in your hand (p. 12).

In the same way, the ceremony of drinking an everyday cup of tea can be transformed to a mindful practice showing the interconnection between human and nonhuman nature. Mindfulness can teach us that our body is not only our own. It can be seen as something that belongs to our ancestors, and to future generations. Eating mindfully can contribute to the realization that humans are caretakers of our bodies and not the owners if them (Hanh, 2016).

As it can be argued that human happiness and that of the Earth are connected, the question “[w]hat shall I eat today?” is a serious one. Modern methods of food production can contribute to the destruction to large ecosystems. Without staying mindful of the fact that human choices with regards to food, the result can be violent to other species, as well as our bodies and the Earth (Hanh, 2016). Eating mindfully can be a practice that connects to responsible consumption, healthy eating, staying respectful of nature, as well as compassionate and less violent to the larger world as a whole.

### *Cultivation of Empathy for the Earth and All Living Creatures*

The cultivation of empathy for all living creatures should be an essential aim of environmental education, as should viewing the Earth as an extension of our body, as reflected in mindfulness practices.

Bai & Scutt (2009) approach mindfulness practice as:

An effective way to cultivate a sense of interbeing or consanguinity between ourselves as human beings and all other beings that make up the ecological community that we call earth. Mindfulness practice cultivates subject-object integration and bonding, rather than subject-object dichotomy and alienation. From this integration and bonding flows love of life (biophilia) and deep appreciation of other beings' sacred existence (p. 100).

Mindfulness has the capacity to promote greater empathy toward nature and all living species. The experience of inter-being; the connection of inner life with that of the outside world; and a bodily/mental interconnectedness with the natural world, can be a reflection and praxis of empathy, love and compassion (Hanh, 1993).

As it can be practiced and achieved through mindfulness, focus on the non-dualistic consciousness that connects humans with nature can contribute to the discovery of a better intersubjective connection with nature and the development of a feeling of deep inter-being and resonance with the Earth and its creatures. Approaching the Earth as continuation of one's body can empower



environmental consciousness, along with the will to defend and protect the natural world (Abram, 1997; Bai & Scutt, 2009; Pulki et al. 2017).

### Concluding Thoughts

It may be time to underline the need to include mindfulness in the field of environmental education and research to the empowering a sense of interconnectedness with the nonhuman world. Ecological consciousness, respect, defense, and care for all living creatures may not come solely through the transmission of scientific knowledge focused on the environment (Tsevreini, 2011). In parallel with scientific, conceptual, and rational approaches, there is the potential for a broad field to develop around the cultivation of our spiritual contact with the more-than-human world through mindfulness, based on “*a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us*” (Abram, 1997, p. 50).

Increasingly, mindfulness is being recognised as an essential tool in educational, with regards to its contribution to the development of bodily and mental concentration and awareness; interpersonal awareness, and emotional stability; reduction of stress and anxiety; and enhancement to the qualities of life like peace, confidence, and joy to be found within it. By contributing to the relief of our disconnectedness from the more-than-human world, and promoting the development of a more harmonious relationship with the nonhuman natural world, the practice of mindfulness through an ecological perspective can support the study of the three pedagogical paths. That have been outlined above. Mindfulness can be utilized to slow the pace of living connect with the Earth, eating with better attention, as well as cultivate empathy and compassion for all living creatures.

As a pedagogical philosophy and methodology, mindfulness has the capacity to contribute to the development of a spiritual human/nature connection, and it can also form the base for a new embodied, and sensual perception and appreciation for the more-than-human world. This could play a vital role in an environmental education built by the empowering a sense of coexistence and solidarity between human and nonhuman beings; an environmental education that aims to cultivate interconnectedness within the framework of a new spiritual and environmental ethos.

Weston (1999) argues that the environmental crisis is a crisis of the senses, of imagination, and of our conceptual world – these are our tools for thinking. In a multiple, many-voiced mosaic of new approaches that attempt to redefine our human existence in a more-than-human universe, mindfulness has much to offer environmental thought, in addition to education, and to the ongoing struggle against the global environmental crisis. This must start by recovering our disconnectedness from nonhuman nature, as well as our own, and nurturing a spiritual bond with all living creatures.

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## Notes On Contributor

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