

Why MBA Students Should Meditate

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Introduction

This essay argues for the introduction of Buddhist mindfulness meditation practice in MBA education for the purposes of expanding the exploration of solutions to environmental problems. Meditation is already taught in many business schools, primarily for the purposes of stress reduction, leadership development and creativity. There are voluntary workshops and meditation programs available to business students at Harvard, Yale, Stanford, INSEAD and many other top MBA programs.

Stress reduction is one positive side effect of a relaxed mind, but it is not the goal of meditation. Relaxation of the mind is an essential step in developing the concentration that can yield insight and wisdom. The ability to hold the mind still can reduce the anxiety that comes from a preoccupation with to-do lists, distractions, and busy-ness. But while learning to relax is valuable, it is merely the tip of the transformative potential of meditation.

In this essay, I refer to meditation in the context of the Buddhist practice of meditation. Meditation lies at the heart of the Buddhist practice as the means to personal transformation. Buddhism has a very sophisticated psychology that takes a meditation practitioner through establishing a foundation of concentration, then developing mindfulness and insight with the aim of freeing the mind of its attachments and freeing practitioners from discontent.

Universities	Corporations
Columbia Business School	AOL Time Warner
Harvard Business School	Apple
INSEAD	AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals
Kellogg School of Management	Deutsche Bank
London School of Economics	Google
University of Michigan Ross School of Business	HBO
Stanford Graduate School of Business	Hughes Aircraft
Wharton MBA	McKinsey and Company
Yale	Nike
	Prentice Hall Publishing
	Procter & Gamble
	Yahoo!

Fig. 1: Meditation offerings at business schools and corporations

True Rewards

The true reward from meditation for business students is the ability to see Business as a conditioned system of rules and beliefs, and thus opening the door to finding new solutions to contemporary problems. In particular this essay focuses on the benefits of meditation for addressing environmental problems, but the argument applies to any conditioned behaviors. As business institutions are changing more slowly than the problems we are facing, it is unlikely that they will move at the speed necessary to adapt to changing conditions. Meditation is a tool that empowers practitioners to address problems with insight and awareness, bringing fresh thinking to complex problems.

In Buddhist psychology, we construct the world of our experience by imposing layer upon layer of meanings on all phenomena we encounter. These layers of meaning become the world as we experience it, not as it is. We tend to see only what we have habituated our minds to see and we respond to stimuli without seeing the full richness of what is actually happening. We bring to every encounter a set of conditioned behaviors that shape our reactions. Eventually we become like trolley cars on a circular track, running over the same tracks again and again, each time reaffirming our conditioning and making change even harder.

To a great extent our predisposition to become quickly habituated to new situations is probably what makes our species so successful. We can abstract from "noisy" environments a few key inputs and quickly learn simple rules to guide our behavior. We are incredibly fast learners, generalizing from limited information, abstracting from too much information, and creating rules of thumb. We are very efficient when we operate within familiar circumstances.

Our business practices, like all behaviors, are also conditioned. This limits our responses to situations. For us to find new solutions we will need to train people to see beyond the conditioning to the world as it is. For the full richness of responses we need to see the world as it is, not as we have been programmed to see it.

Conditioned Business Models

As with any system, initial conditions have a strong influence on the future states of the system. Our contemporary business systems emerged from the second industrial revolution in the United States and the convergence of many circumstances created the world's largest homogeneous consumer market. It is from this era that the business models based upon mass production and consumption emerged.

This essay is not a condemnation of mass production and consumption. These models have

been effective at creating incredible wealth in developed countries and have been responsible for raising the welfare of billions. Our current problem lies in appreciating that the context of the United States in the late 19th century no longer exists. Global consumption under the existing paradigms is putting billions at risk. While these models raised the welfare of billions they are also the primary cause of environmental devastation in the search for resources to fuel production, species depletion, and, as population continues to rise, a waste stream that is far greater than the capacity of the planet's environment to absorb. There are also social problems that arise from nurturing generations of children to believe that they will find happiness in consumption. Despite the growing signs of system failure, these models remain virtually uncontested in their dominance and their rightness is hardwired into the psyche of our MBA graduates, our future business leaders, making them part of the problem instead of part of the solution.

Like Paul David's famous path dependency argument for the persistence of the ubiquitous QWERTY keyboard, business models persist not necessarily because of their rightness, but through the resilient institutional arrangements that hold them in place. The professionalization of business education, the institutional and social arrangements of markets all work together to condition business behavior. The institution of business education persists communication of the dominant models and is one of the primary channels for transmitting them to business practitioners.

The Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration started its Master's of Business Administration program in 1908. Since that time the degree has become the premium professional business degree with hundreds of thousands of postgraduate business students annually. Not only has the MBA curriculum remained remarkably persistent over time, the MBA curriculum has spread worldwide with programs in Bombay, Beijing and Boston virtually the same.

Faced with environmental damage that is the result of existing business practices, MBA graduates and their education must play a role in resolving these problems. But in the face of overwhelming evidence of the destructive consequences of mass production and consumption we insist on repeating our out-of-date business models. The persistence of conditioned views and patterns of behavior lie at the root of this destruction. By empowering students with mindfulness when faced with unfamiliar situations they react from a more authentic place and with a much richer set of possibilities.

Quoidbach et al. (2013) found that at any time in our lives we tend to think of ourselves at the apex of our life changes and that we believe that most of the change in our lives is behind us. It gives us an air of arrogance that we are always "right" in our current thinking of the future. Intellectually, of course, we understand that everything changes, but we live life as if it

doesn't. For business education, we believe we have already found the solutions to our problems which makes us much less open to consider new possibilities.

The Three Characteristics of all Business Phenomena

Our blind spot when it comes to business and the environment is our desire for things to remain stable and permanent. Which is why we continue to rely upon business models long after their relevance passes. In Buddhist terminology, *anicca*, or impermanence, is one of the three characteristics or marks of existence. All phenomena change, including business models and their context in the world. However, because systems have momentum, when change inevitably happens we are caught unprepared and cling to our past models out of familiarity which leads to unsatisfactoriness, or *dhukka*, the second of the characteristics. We lose a tremendous amount of energy in the friction between the world as we would like it to be - unchanging and stable, and the world as it is, constantly changing.

The roots of business conditioning go deep. Our dominant views of the natural environment emerge from the late 19th century in America when models of mass production emerged. The conditions of the times made it possible to exclude the environment from most business decisions. The vast expanse of wilderness, low population density, and plentiful resources allowed models to emerge that externalized environmental costs. Embedded in the models were implicit assumptions of virtually unlimited affordable and stable supplies of fossil fuels, and an environment expansive enough to absorb all the waste from the processes of production.

The success of the American model over the next century and a half led to its export to every corner of the earth with the result that today the desire to consume like an American has become the global aspiration. Travelers standing in a mall in Beijing can be forgiven if they are confused about which city they are in because all malls everywhere almost look the same - same brands, same look, same appeal. A reasonable person recognizes that global consumption like an American on a global scale would be devastating to the planet's ecosystems. The ability of the air, water and earth to provide resources and absorb waste in pace with production and consumption is may be past its tipping point. Yet our ability to accept that our existing models are causing harm and to revisit them is met with fear and resistance.

As it is through the business activities of production and consumption that society has the greatest impact on the environment, it will be through changing these behaviors that we can have the greatest impact on resolving social and environmental challenges. Those in key positions have the opportunity to influence the institutions of business and how business and the natural environment might balance their relationship. However, we seem to be self-

absorbed with preserving our way of doing business, or hopeful that we only need to change it a bit, and not deal with a major change.

Which leads us to *anatta*, the third characteristic of existence. Many words have been used in an attempt to capture the meaning of this term: not self, non-self, duality, voidness and emptiness. *Anatta* is a wedge between ourselves and others – people and the natural environment. In our interactions with others we think of ourselves as suffering the actions of the external world upon us, but we are reacting to a projection of our meanings, values and desires onto the phenomena in the external world. The strong attachment we have for our views fabricates a separate identity for ourselves, a self that is distinct from others. This is I, this is me, this is mine.

Our identity is self-centered and gives us an illusion of control. We find security in constructing a solid and stable sense of self. We survive in a relentlessly changing world by keeping our own self-constructed world safe from the chaos that surrounds us. In envisioning a separate, enduring self, we attach ourselves to our strong views that help us order our world, and we alienate ourselves from others. In our self-absorption we fail to see the how we are deeply connected with all others.

In such a self-centered world, all resources seem scarce and we are always in competition with others for the resources we see necessary for our welfare. Their win is our loss even at the trivial level. It takes a tremendous amount of energy to hold such a world together because we always need something to reinforce our sense of self, and we must expend energy to patrol the boundaries to ensure that our constructed world is safe and secure.

Getting Stuck

MBA graduates are conditioned through their business education to respond to business situations. To the extent that the natural environment is excluded in most frameworks and principles of business practices, MBAs translate their conditioning into action, perpetuating a harmful separation of business and the environment.

The models and frameworks taught in business education are shorthand abstractions of the real world. Working with a reduced set of variables makes decisions efficient. There may be theories behind the frameworks, but usually business students are not exposed to the subtleties of the assumptions or engage in philosophic discussions of the constraints of the models or the limits of their application. Decisions become formulaic and habituated. As managers with finite attention this is actually desirable because it enables managers to sift through large amounts of information quickly. Managers with the MBA toolbox can respond quickly and decisively to the routine situations they face. The case method, a form of

business story telling, socializes students into the style and manner of decision making.

The socialization of MBA students is as much a part of business education as the curriculum. Through their education students are conditioned to look, think, talk and walk like a business person. Values of money, control, decisiveness, authority, assertiveness (some might say aggressiveness) are characteristic of MBA graduates. There is a strong MBA sense of self. Along with this self comes the separation between self and other, and a tunnel vision that sees the world in limited terms which leads to decisions that persist destructive models.

To be absolutely clear, this is not to say that business education or business students are inherently or intentionally "bad" or destructive. Rather, like all institutions, at some point in time the persistence of the institution becomes more important than solving the problems the institution was originally meant to solve. The institutions of our markets and business models are good at creating wealth but not so good at caring for the environment that is the host for all the wealth. Conditioned business behavior makes it difficult for managers to respond robustly to new problems, and they respond habitually with the reduced set of variables in their frameworks, which constrains their responses to environmental problems. The dualism (a separate you and I) separates managers and their organizations from the natural environment. The result is that organizations become disconnected from the consequences of their actions. Harming others or the environment becomes acceptable risk when we perceive that we are alienated from them.

The lesson from the encroaching disasters of climate change, poverty at the bottom of the pyramid, pandemics, is that all things are indeed connected. By excluding factors such as the natural environment in our decisions we fail to see how the activities of our organizations are interconnected with the natural world. When we try to simplify the world using our abstract models, we always leave out something that eventually matters. And when "eventually" happens, we find ourselves stuck clinging to our views and resisting change. Our potential to find creative solutions to problems is compromised by our tunnel vision.

Getting Unstuck

Meditation can help our MBA graduates get unstuck. While sitting in silence may seem an odd way to improve business practices, it is in the silence, stillness and spaciousness of meditation that students can develop an ability to maintain focus and become aware of their conditioned views. Meditation can peel away the layers of constructs, frameworks, models, meanings, and assumptions that we bring to each and every object we encounter. The artifice of our constructed world becomes visible, we become less attached to our strong views, and interconnections are rediscovered. We can respond to events not from habitual responses but with full awareness.

Meditation can help weaken our attachment to models and perspectives we hold as immutable truths and expand the space of possible solutions. It is not necessary to react on autopilot when we are aware; there are other choices that can be made. The space of possible reactions to events expands. In this larger space we will find constructive alternatives to unhealthy patterns of behavior.

It is naive to think that the introduction of meditation alone will solve our social and environmental ills. Mindfulness alone is not the solution. It is impossible to decouple one small piece of the Buddhist psychology and call it "the solution." What is to prevent using our increased awareness to find creative ways to take advantage of others or cause even greater environmental harm? As our mindfulness matures so must our ethical views. An aversion to doing harm to the environment and society must be cultivated along with the understanding of the connection between business actions and consequences. Mindfulness is just a first step.

We are at a time in which business models need to change, probably to a large degree. These models are deeply institutionalized in business infrastructure and in business education. MBA students, groomed to be future business leaders are in ideal positions to institute change. The practice of mindfulness through meditation is a tool that can provide MBA students with the awareness and insight to make wise decisions and find new solutions to the disconnect between business activity and the welfare of the natural environment.

References

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