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NO MINDFULNESS WITHOUT SELF-BOUNDARIES

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INTRODUCTION

“It is an illusion that boundaries actually exist, but it is also an illusion that they do not exist-sometimes an extremely important illusion,” writes the German philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmann in his most recent book “Lob der Grenze” (“In Praise of Boundaries”, Liessmann, 2012). Is it also an illusion that we humans do not need a mental self-boundary, a boundary that separates our mental inner world from the outside world?

Buddhist writings speak of dissolution of the self as a desirable goal, that is, a dissolution of the isolated self whereby connectedness with everything around us can be established. Western culture aspires to the same goal, but by very different means and with exactly the opposite result. In the last two hundred years or so, Western culture has tried to dissolve all kinds of boundaries until reaching the core boundary of the self. This final phase, the dissolution of the mental self-boundary, has probably already commenced (Funk, 2011).

Let us look (see fig. 1) at how various systemic boundaries surrounding us have largely disappeared over time or are currently undergoing a process of dissolution.



Figure 1. Graphic representation of the systemic boundaries surrounding us.

Secularization put an end to the importance of religious boundaries. The superior authority of religion was transferred to the state (Taylor, 2007). The disintegration of religious boundaries led to new freedoms. However, no sooner had the religious boundaries in Western culture dissolved (in Islamic culture the struggle to preserve religious boundaries, which there also are starting to undergo erosion, is in full swing), than the next boundaries came into focus. In Europe, national boundaries are being opened up not only by means of political treaties, such as trade agreements, but also through globalization, greatly increased mobility and new achievements in communication. This is not only a sign of the common will to break down national boundaries but also of the powerlessness of states to control international companies (Liessmann, 2012).

It appears that the progressive dissolution of boundaries is centrifugal in nature, from a distance coming ever closer to us as individuals. Moreover, it is apparent that these processes of boundary dissolution do not proceed successively but to some extent occur simultaneously, depending on the culture and favoring conditions. Thus, in the Western world, the dissolution of the next boundary that of the family is further advanced than in other cultures. In parts of Europe the strength and significance of the family boundary is sometimes still shaped by place of residence (rural or urban) and adherence to traditions. In the familial context in particular, traditions have a cohesive function, strengthening the sense of belonging and communication within the family. The high divorce rate, which is no longer a cause for surprise, is, among other things, a sign of weakness of the modern family boundary. The example of divorce demonstrates how

superordinate systems such as the church can influence subordinate systems such as the family. Until recently, divorce was forbidden by the Catholic Church. There are still cultures in which dissolution of the marriage vow is sanctioned and can lead to expulsion from the clan. The clan boundary is located between the family and state boundaries (see fig. 1) and continues to exist in many cultures.

It is easy to conceive that in an environment in which, for example, a strong family boundary exists, protection of the individual from onerous and negative influences from outside is amply ensured by the family boundary. Individuals who function within a strongly protective family boundary do not need a closely filtering individual mental self-boundary. The family boundary assumes this function, which allows the individual to find his/her way in life even without a strong self-boundary. If the disintegration of the family boundary advances quite rapidly in the space of one or two generations, this could lead to the individual suddenly finding him/herself quite unprepared and unprotected. This phenomenon can be observed in Europe among many migrants with traditionally strong family boundaries. This process further accelerates the social trend towards dissolution of the self-boundary.

Has a new phase of human history now commenced, in which the disintegration of the self-boundary will be aspired to? Is this not astonishing, given that it was not so long ago that the Declaration of Human Rights was formulated and declared in 1948 (Declaration of Human Rights, 1948)? For the political actors at the time, it was clear that the integrity of the individual, security of person (Article 3), freedom of opinion and the right to one's own world view (Article 18) had to be protected. The dissolution of boundaries appears to be predominant in almost all areas of life. For young people in particular, it is almost impossible to resist this new direction. With candid Facebook entries, they make their inner world accessible to anyone with a PC or smartphone (Turkle, 2011). Digital technologies make it possible to dissolve the boundaries of time and space, among other things, allow us to enact realities without boundaries and impair the reality testing that should distinguish the inner from the external world (Funk, 2011). Should we put a stop to this development, or should we stand by and allow this trend of civilization to continue? And what does this have to do with mindfulness?

THE MENTAL SELF-BOUNDARY AND MINDFULNESS

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A boundary must be able to be crossed in both directions. If this is not the case, it is not a boundary but rather an ending. A national border can be crossed on foot or by car, for example. The means by which we can transcend our mental self-boundary is attention. Attention is the process that shapes the direction of the flow of energy and information. Attention can be within consciousness so we are aware of the object of our attention or can be non-conscious, in that the energy and information flow is being directed but we are not aware of that flow (Siegel, 2012). We as humans are able to change the location of our attention from the inner world to the outer world and vice versa. We even have the ability to enter the mental inner world of a fellow human with the location of our attention, which in this context is understood as empathy (Blaser, 2012a). We wander with our attention and are able to move between these mental spaces, as long as our own self-boundary does not stand in our way and we are not halted by “foreign customs officials”. When we consciously decide to dwell for an extended period in our own mental inner world, the significance of our self-boundary is diminished. This is exactly what occurs when we dwell mindfully in our inner world. But let us continue one step at a time.

Boundaries are necessary in order to be able to make distinctions. How does our mental state differ when we dwell with the location of our attention in our own mental inner world or outside it? The inner world, the intrapersonal space, is the location of our emotions, past and present, agreeable and disagreeable; our experiences, from long ago or recent, as well as our images and beliefs, e.g. unexpressed images of humans and God as well as auditory and other sensory images (Damasio, 2010). The mental self-boundary not only determines what is included and excluded, but also the exchange of emotions, experiences and images across the self-boundary (Blaser, 2008).

When we connect with a feeling, image or experience from within our inner world, we may perceive a bodily sensation in the process (Gendlin, 1998; Levine, 2005). If we observe the same emotion, image or experience from outside, from the extrapersonal space, we are disconnected and do not experience any physical reaction. By moving mentally into our inner world, we are able to physically connect with our own emotions. The reverse journey is also possible; by getting aware of our physical state, we enter our inner world with the location of our attention. Concentrating on the breath and the mindfulness that thus ensues is a striking illustration of this.

When we move with the location of our attention from this side of our mental self-boundary to the other side of this boundary, we enter a cognitive mental state in which we are able to think in a logical, rational, planning, problem-solving and

analytical way. On an interpersonal level, various modes of attention can be activated (Blaser, 2012a), such as cognitive self-perception (looking inside from without), mind-reading (what do I think the other is thinking) (Gallagher & Frith, 2003) and theory-theory (cognitive deciphering of another's person's emotions) (Gallese & Goldman, 1998). During cognitive analysis of an object or a fellow human (e.g. the dismissal of an inefficient employee), we are not able to establish a connection to our physical state. It is different if the manager is connected with his/her inner world, is mindful and perceives the employee with empathy. This would undoubtedly lead to a different approach.

At this point, I would like to invite you to accompany me in leaving the cognitive mode of attention and to enter your own intrapersonal space. On the following pages, I wish to show you an exercise with which you can explore and experience firsthand the phenomena described above. The exercise consists of 8 parts. To begin with, read the first four sets of instructions and then carry out the exercises. After that, read the instructions for parts 5 to 8 and then do these four exercises. You might also wish to ask somebody to read the instructions to you at an appropriate speed.

EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS: PARTS 1 TO 4

Find a room that is at least 6 meters long and if possible 4 to 6 meters wide. Sit down in one of the corners in a comfortable position. We will begin with a period of mindfulness (Part 1). With eyes closed, center yourself in your usual manner. You may enter your inner world by non-judgmental observation of your breathing or find the way to your core by another means.

When you are centered, remain in this state for a while and try to consciously perceive your body, in the way you might be familiar with from the body scan meditation, for example (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Let in any emotions or images that arise and accept any sensations. Then slowly open your eyes (Part 2) and allow your gaze to roam where it wants. Follow where your gaze wants to go without trying to understand it. Now slowly scan the room with your eyes and observe the objects in the room without naming them, without association or comment. See if your eyes observe an object that you find agreeable or pleasurable to look at (Part 3).

When your eyes do find such an object, let your gaze rest on this object or part of the room. While doing so, remain inside yourself and feel what physical sensations are present. Pay attention to such things as your breathing, body

temperature, muscle tone or facial muscles. Label your current physical sensations in your mind, and remain in this state of consciousness for 1 to 2 minutes. Now allow your eyes to scan the room again until they observe something, whatever it may be, that is unpleasant to look at (Part 4).

Hold this object or part of the room in your gaze and remain in contact with your body. Remain with the location of your attention in your inner world and look at the unpleasant object uninterruptedly. What do you now feel in your body? Where is a change in your physical sensations perceptible? Simply allow this to happen; accept the current physical sensations. Observe any changes and again remain in this mode of attention for 1 to 2 minutes. This is the end of the fourth part of the exercise.

Take a moment to relax now before you begin doing the first 4 parts of the exercise. Now carry out parts 1 to 4 of the exercise.

EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS: PARTS 5 TO 8

Remaining in the corner of the room (the exercise can also be performed outdoors in natural surroundings), choose a spot that is around 5 meters away from you. We will name your location in the corner of the room “position A” and that 5 meters away “position B”. While remaining seated at position A, imagine you are standing at position B looking at yourself from a distance of 5 meters and observing yourself sitting in a corner of the room at position A (Part 5). What is it like, to observe yourself in your imagination from position B sitting in position A? How does it feel to see you from this meta-position? Do any thoughts or physical sensations arise? Do you judge the person sitting there or do you notice an affectionate smile on your face?

While remaining seated in the corner and continuing to observe yourself from outside, imagine directing your line of vision at the previously chosen unpleasant object (Part 6). Imagine you are now looking at the unpleasant object from position B. What is that like? Try to consciously observe what thoughts or emotions become noticeable. Follow your chain of thought or sequence of emotions. Allow in everything that comes for 1 to 2 minutes.

Now alter your line of vision again and focus on the pleasant object that you chose in Part 3 from the perspective of position B (Part 7). Thus, imagine you are standing at position B and looking at the agreeable object from there. What is that

like? How do you now perceive the pleasant object? Once again pursue your thoughts or sensations.

We now come to the end, to the last part of the exercise (Part 8). Return with the location of your attention to position A, mentally sit yourself down again in the corner of the room, close your eyes once more and center yourself. Pay attention to your breathing; take note of your posture without judging yourself. Again remain in this state of consciousness for 1 to 2 minutes before ending the exercise.

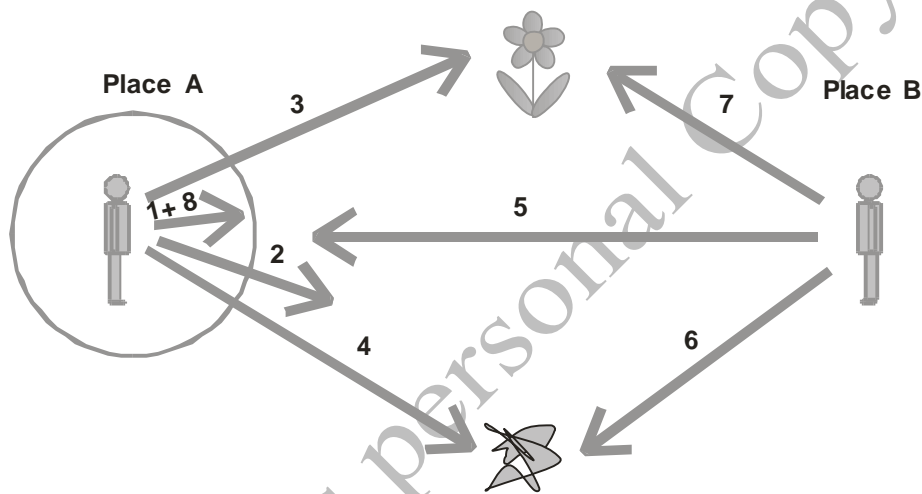


Figure 2. At position/place A, within your circular self-boundary, you are centered and look inside from within (arrows 1 and 8 = mindful interoception) or mindfully from within at the outside world (arrows 2, 3 and 4). At position/place B you look at yourself from outside (arrow 5 = cognitive self-perception) and cognitively at something unpleasant (arrow 6) or pleasant (arrow 7).

DISCUSSION OF EXERCISE PARTS 1 TO 4

In the first four parts of the exercise, the location of your attention is your inner world (see figure 2). You are able to explore what is going on inside you; you can discover your own inner truth. The Tibetan term for Buddhist is “nangpa”. “Nang” means “inside” and “pa” someone. It signifies someone with insight, someone with introspection, someone who does not search for the truth outside, but within, in the nature of his/her mind (Sogyal, 2002). To center yourself means to bring your mind home. When you have arrived within yourself,

you are bodily in contact with your inner images, experiences and emotions. You are in contact with the quality of your sensations (vedana) (Von Allmen, 2010). In the first part of the exercise you found the path to your inner self by means of the breath, for example. The path of mindfulness is not a journey from here to there but from there to here (Kornfield, 2008). In order to arrive in your inner world you must cross the boundary of your inner world from outside to within.

Then you know that you have “arrived”. When you now open your eyes you look beyond your self-boundary into the outside world. You are still connected with your body from within even when your gaze is directed at the other side of your self-boundary. If you look with no specific objective, your eyes know what to do. They perceive the surroundings exactly as they are, without judging, without adjectives, without classifying anything. Although your eyes see every detail, they only observe the essentials. In this mental state, your eyes observe with your whole body. To make you aware of this, I asked you to stop moving your gaze when you experienced a pleasant sensation. You rested your eyes on something without realizing that it would elicit, for example, a deep breath, relaxation of the shoulder muscles or a smile. You looked outwards and simultaneously listened in to your body. I call this “bi-focused perception”. This simultaneous awareness of both the inner and outside world is the essence of mindfulness. At the moment in which we simultaneously perceive the outside world as well as the inner world, the boundary between these worlds dissolves. Through mindful awareness, the space “within” merges instantaneously with the space “outside”. In the Buddhist sense we are able to recognize ourselves in this moment of experience; we are not separate or different, we were always the same (Sogyal, 2002).

In order to be able to perceive the inner and outside world in the same moment, it is necessary that there exists a mental self-boundary that separates these two spatial entities from each other. At the same time it becomes evident that we must firstly cross the self-boundary from outside to within, because without this action we are unable to look outwards from within, and we cannot feel the physical connection between ourselves and our surroundings. We also experience this feeling of present connectedness with the outside world when we look from within at a fellow human. We see a person and sense our own body at the same time. We see his/her facial expression, gestures, posture and clothing, and at the same time we sense a growing warmth in our stomach, for example, or a pleasant tingling in our hands and feet. We have a bi-focused perception. In neurobiology, the term “shared representations between self and other” is used for the simultaneous perception of the self and another. However, this does not refer

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to mindful bi-focused perception, but rather theory of mind (Decety & Sommerville, 2003) or empathy (Preston & Hofelich, 2012).

In the fourth part of the exercise, we rest our gaze on an object in the room while an unpleasant physical sensation makes itself felt. For example, the chest might suddenly contract and the shoulder muscles tighten. You might start to frown or feel restlessness in your lower legs. More often than not, at this point we leave the inner world with the location of our attention and sever contact with our inner world and our physical sensations. In psychology, we call this phenomenon “dissociation”. This mechanism is not in itself pathological; it is a natural reaction to the unpleasant constriction of the chest and the tension in the shoulder muscles. Unconsciously, we do not wish to perceive the discomforting physical sensations. Perhaps you noticed during the exercise that the contact with your body perception was severed. This is where acceptance training becomes important. If we learn to accept unpleasant physical sensations, we can remain with the location of our attention in our inner world. If we are able to remain in our inner world, we are able to continue to perceive the outside world with feeling. This is particularly important if we see a fellow human who elicits an unpleasant physical sensation, for example because he/she is wearing an ugly watch, has a stain on their trousers or perhaps just speaks differently or chose the wrong profession (aversions). If we are still able to perceive this person from within ourselves, we will feel connected to him/her. This connectedness, this feeling of being in accord with another person, enables a respectful and mindful relationship. Our self-boundary does not separate us from this person, but makes a sensitive connection possible in the first place.

DISCUSSION OF EXERCISE PARTS 5 TO 8

When you take the path in the opposite direction, from here to there, leaving your mental inner world with the location of your attention, you lose the capacity for bi-focused perception. If you move into the extrapersonal mental space with the location of your attention you lose contact with your physical sensations. It is possible to bring this about deliberately and consciously by imagining that you are observing yourself from outside, for example. In parts 5 to 7 of the exercise, by imagining that you were standing 5 meters away at position B, you crossed your mental self-boundary, this time to the outside from within. We usually only become aware of this deliberate crossing of the boundary when we notice our altered perceptions of ourselves and external objects. How did you feel when you

observed yourself from outside from the meta-position? If you were able to make the step to the outside from within, it is likely that your perception was evaluative, judgmental, explanatory, associative or interpretive, for example, and that you did not feel any subtle physical sensations in the process. If the location of our attention is the extrapersonal space, a cognitive mental state is activated. In this mental mode, we perceive an object in an analytical and classificatory manner, without consciously perceiving any physical changes at the same time, such as frowning, breathing deeply or tingling in the feet. The man with the stain on his trousers is judged to be unkempt; his clothing is assessed as dirty. In this mental state we see many details, but often we are unable to perceive the essence. The stain on the item of clothing is evaluated, but the man's mental state, for example uncertainty, is not perceived. The man is categorized without feelings. We are located with our attention in the extrapersonal space, where it is not possible to establish a connection between the inner and outer worlds, where the internal cannot merge with the external. This cognitive recording and evaluation is a purely human ability. For example, animals make decisions without consciously categorizing, typecasting or differentiating. The cognitive mode of attention enables humans to develop concepts, to make calculations or to rationalize; is not possible to feel connectedness at the same time. There are many people who dwell for years with the location of their attention in the outside world and who can no longer remember how to enter their own inner world, and who are cut off from their bodily sensations. In this situation, the outside world is mentally the only place to exist; there is no accessible inner world, let alone a fusion of the internal and the external. The inner world and with it the boundary of the inner world cease to exist, and simultaneously the outside world loses the boundary between it and the self. In the 8th and final part of the exercise, you have again entered your mental inner world with the location of your attention, and the connection with your bodily sensations is re-established.

CONCLUSION

Our Western culture, with its emphasis on consumption and self-rewarding behavior, seduces us into leaving our inner world; it one-sidedly teaches small children the extra personal cognitive mode and declares the outer world to be the ideal mental location. With multitasking, a horrendous pace of life and a massive pressure to achieve, it forces us to develop new survival strategies within this

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extra personal space. We try to compensate for the lack of a mental inner space by spreading our attention even thinner, an even faster pace and 24-hour availability. At the same time, the self-boundaries that still exist are becoming more indistinct and permeable. The spirit of our times desires to transcend boundaries, eliminate them, abolish them, make them disappear (Liessmann, 2012). Whether we now dwell with the location of our attention only in the outside world (permanent dissociation) or gradually break down the mental self-boundary (the end of privacy), in both cases bi-focused perception will no longer exist, and there will be no perceptible fusion of the internal and the external and thus no mindfulness.

Mindfulness is only possible when our inner world is clearly defined, when there is a boundary that allows us to look outwards from within, and when we can sense our body from within our self-boundary. Mindfulness is only possible when we can return from there to here, to our protected mental inner world, and feel at home.

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