**Minding less: Exploring mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations through Skillful Means**

# Abstract

Mindfulness has received increased attention in organizational studies. Yet we ask, is mindfulness necessary, indeed achievable, in every ‘moment’ and every context? Mindfulness as co-opted by organizations is often considered a positive and helpful state, whilst little attention is paid to the important notion of mindlessness. Our comprehensive exploratory review of mindfulness and mindlessness highlights theoretical debates and responds to calls for a more balanced approach to mindlessness and mindfulness. In addition, it highlights practical implications to management learning by introducing Eastern Buddhist principles of non-attachment, practiced through the key concept of Skillful Means. A distinctive contribution of this article is a *Five-Fold Framework* detailing five aspects of a skillful mindful and mindless approach: context-flexibility, managerial emotional display, managerial learning under complex situations and dilemmas, transferring mindfulness practices from individual to organizational level, and context-sensitive research.

***Keywords:*** Buddhism, compassion, management learning, mindfulness, mindlessness, non-attachment, Skillful Means

# Introduction

Mindfulness research has become increasingly popular in organization and management learning studies (Dane, 2011; Fiol and O’Connor, 2003; Levinthal and Rerup, 2006; Svalgaard, 2018; Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006). In practice, mindfulness is often promoted as necessary for developing awareness in volatile, uncertain, changing, complex and ambiguous circumstances (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014) and is used widely by many including clinicians (Davidson and Begley, 2012). This has led to the concept of mindfulness being adapted to align with managerial imperatives (Hien, 2014). However, research tends to highlight both the costs and benefits of mindfulness (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999; Levinthal and Rerup, 2006; March, 1994; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Rerup, 2005).

In addition, there have been calls for a “balanced theory” of mindfulness (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006; Rerup, 2005) that takes into consideration the interdependence in the practice of mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations. Hafenbrack (2017) has introduced the concept of on-the-spot mindfulness training intervention in the organization, which aims to highlight that the state of mindfulness can be induced in an individual only when it is needed in a specific workplace situation. The argument is that this approach will allow individuals to be less mindful in situations when constant mindfulness can be counterproductive.

However, we argue that a Western pragmatic approach to both long-term and on-the-spot mindfulness interventions can be problematic if a clear understanding of the nature of mindfulness practices is lacking (Dane, 2011). An overly prescriptive approach to and misuse of mindfulness (Grant, 2015) may shift the focus to negative stimuli in the present rather than nonjudgmental disconnection and detachment from such states (Brendel, 2015). Notably, Gethin (2011) claims that Western mindfulness practices in organizations have developed from popular Buddhist-inspired texts written by Western teachers and as such is considerably different from practices described in the Buddhist canon (Bodhi, 2011; Gethin, 2011; Thānissaro, 2012). We note the idea of being attached to any specific interpretations of mindfulness and mindlessness has precipitated vigorous scholarly debate.

The primary purpose of this article is to contribute to scholarly discussions of both mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations. We demonstrate this by examining mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations, taking a Skillful Means approach that emphasizes context and compassion when practicing mindfulness and mindlessness, without extreme attachments to either personal or organizational ‘end’ purposes. We argue that a comprehensive examination of Skillful Means, a Buddhist practice of non-attachment, will make salient a practical and flexible path forward whilst contributing philosophical and theoretical insights to organization and management learning. Importantly we emphasize that mindfulness and mindlessness co-exist in organizations in an interactive and interrelated manner.

The article consists of four parts. First, drawing from management journals and Buddhist studies, we compare the roles of mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations to gain a fully informed view. Second, in order to highlight implications for contemporary practices in organizations, we revisit mindfulness from a Buddhist perspective and introduce Eastern approaches of non-attachment and Skillful Means. Third, based on our synthesis of substantive literature and the identified gap, we propose practical implications for organizational and management learning. Finally, we offer a Five-Fold Framework for future research in the field.

# Mindfulness in organizations

The notion of mindfulness in organizations has received significant attention in academic studies (Dane, 2011; Fiol and O’Connor, 2003; Ray et al., 2011; Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2008). Indeed, Stahl and Goldstein (2010) claim there has been a “mindfulness revolution” in the business world. Mindfulness at organizational levels refers to the capability of an organization to bring heightened awareness to each moment. Mindfulness can help people quickly discern threats and respond appropriately (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2008). According to Weick and Sutcliffe (2008), mindfulness in organizations is based on five interrelated processes: preoccupation with failure, non-simplified interpretations, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise. These processes are said to contribute to organizational learning by enabling the identification of errors and threats; creating multiple perspectives, providing contextualized interpretations and viewpoints, enabling attentiveness, situational awareness and tacit knowledge, stimulating the capability to analyze and learn from mistakes, and helping to deal with unexpected events (Becke, 2014). Empirical and theoretical studies of mindfulness in organizations have been carried out in worker reliability (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006; Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012), and where operating systems require an extraordinary level of both safety and productivity in demanding conditions. Mindfulness has been analyzed in organizational high-performing systems, in workplaces where healthy practices are promoted, and in knowledge-intensive, innovation-driven and project-based organizations (Becke, 2013).

In spite of the increased interest, the lack of conceptual agreement on the meaning of mindfulness remains problematic (Svalgaard, 2018). In reviewing the literature on mindfulness in organizations, we conducted an extensive and systematic literature review based on peer-reviewed articles and books which focused on topics of mindfulness and mindlessness in EBSCO databases including Business Source Complete, organization studies, philosophy, psychology and religion. Buddhist principles from the Pāli Canon[[1]](#footnote-1), Diamond Sūtra[[2]](#footnote-2) and Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra[[3]](#footnote-3) were reviewed. After reviewing the literature on mindfulness, three significant issues relating to the framing of mindfulness in Western organizational studies emerged: first, the concept of mindfulness has been reduced to a moment-awareness technique for pragmatic organizational purposes; second, mindfulness as an individual practice has been generalized for organizational use, ignoring individual choices associated with mindfulness practices; and third, organizations have commercialized mindfulness in ways that overlook both the differences in practicing mindfulness at individual and organizational levels, and its ancient origins as a wisdom- and ethics-based practice originating from the Noble Eightfold Path[[4]](#footnote-4).

***In relation to the first point***, Purser and Milillo (2015) argue that research on mindfulness focuses merely on attention enhancement, “moment” awareness and stress reduction at the individual level. If mindfulness is identified as present-centered non-judgmental awareness, it is one-sided and differs from the understanding of Buddhist traditions (Dreyfus, 2011; Dunne, 2011; Gethin, 2011). Unlike the modernization and misinterpretation of mindfulness as rendered in the West (Wallace, 2006), Buddhist traditions and texts emphasize being aware of values through the faculty of mindfulness – remembering and recollecting what was done and said in the past (Bodhi, 2011: 23; Gethin, 2011). Thānissaro (2012) emphasizes that the Buddha in his path of mindfulness did not encourage practitioners to abandon past memories and experiences in exchange for a present awareness, but rather, with skillful direction, stimulated a selective recall of memories.

Ergo, ‘right mindfulness’ from a Buddhist perspective includes a state of mindlessness – habits, functional fixedness, “single exposure” to information and context dependency (Langer, 1992) – in resembling how Buddhist mindfulness articulates wisdom from addressing past experiences. In Buddhism, mindfulness does not neglect judgment and discrimination (Bodhi, 2011; Singh, 2010). Based on experience, one can make an “effort to abandon wrong intention and to acquire right intention: this is one’s right effort” (Bodhi, 2011: 26). Even though Western mindfulness programs may expound its effectiveness in improving lives (Eberth and Sedlmeter, 2012; Halliwell, 2014), downplaying Buddhist traditional principles of mindfulness curtails the role of mindfulness in generating the state of ‘right mindfulness’.

***In terms of the second point***, arguably a ‘mindful organization’ does not necessarily mean that employees at all hierarchical levels should be mindful at all times (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006). A further perceived weakness in organizational research concerning mindfulness lies in its functional and instrumental perspective (Becke, 2014). At the organizational level, mindfulness tends to concentrate on employees’ mindfulness as a function that can be utilized to serve the organization’s interest (Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003). This shift in focus may result in marginalizing the intrinsic wellbeing of employees, their motivation and development of their competencies (Becke, 2014) and disregarding individual differences in terms of intellectual, physical and psychological abilities. Furthermore, empirical studies suggest that social dynamics and individual differences in organizations challenge the right interpretation of ‘right mindfulness’, which can result in the misuse of mindfulness practices as techniques for organizational purposes rather than an ethics-based practice (Vu and Gill, 2017). The practice of mindfulness is dynamic and rich in nature, and cannot be generalized as a one-size-fits-all practice. Mindfulness is more than just a meditation technique for stress-reduction, it is an ethical, longitudinal and holistic practice that requires intellectual awareness and transformation rather than physical concentration (Qiu and Rooney, 2017; Vu and Gill, 2017).

***In terms of the third point***, notwithstanding the popularity of mindfulness in organizations, there are concerns about the emergence of a “mindfulness fad” (Carroll, 2006; Duerr, 2004). Studies on mindfulness as deployed in Western organizational contexts are not without debate and have ‘blind spots’ (Becke, 2014). Academic mainstream conversations on mindfulness highlight the commercialization and commodification of mindfulness in organizations in the West (Hyland, 2015; Purser and Loy, 2013). Organizations are seen to favor “commercialized mindfulness” because they consider it a “quick fix”, “band-aid” or “panacea” to cure problems in contemporary life (Hyland, 2015). Purser and Loy (2013) refer to the commodification of mindfulness into marketable techniques for modern organizations as a lucrative cottage industry. Selective approaches have led to downplaying the Buddhist purpose of mindfulness, which is to liberate one from greed, ill-will, and delusion in order to eliminate suffering. Arguably, mindfulness is much more than just a number of techniques for stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2011), calming or improving concentration. It is a state of concentration or ‘right mindfulness’ influenced by various elements drawn from Buddhist principles and the Noble Eightfold Path, including thoughts, speech, actions, wisdom, compassion, livelihood and effort (Purser, 2014; Purser and Loy, 2013).

Mindfulness for corporate purposes has also been criticized for not taking into consideration religious, cultural or spiritual diversity as well as different approaches to meditation and mindfulness across major traditions (Goleman, 1988; Singh, 2010). The misconception that mindfulness is a matter for the individual, for private use for self-advancement or corporate purposes (Purser and Loy, 2013) steers it away from the Buddhist principles of “non-self”[[5]](#footnote-5). Hence, mindfulness is neither reducible to psychological traits nor equivalent to non-judgmental awareness (Purser and Milillo, 2015). In Buddhism, mindfulness is based on wisdom and compassion, articulating values not only from ‘the moment’ but also from past experiences (Bodhi, 2011; Gethin, 2011).

Western interpretations of mindfulness that distance themselves from Buddhist interpretations, have caused confusion both in practice and in scholarly conversations. This has led to mindfulness practices being appropriated from their original forms of practice in Buddhism and transferred to organizations, leading to misinterpretations of its characteristic of ‘universal’ adaptability. Buddhist mindfulness is a wisdom-based practice, attained through various means, not necessarily through meditation alone (Brown and Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness aims to help the practitioner realize an egoless state of existence, thus eliminating sufferings that arise from ego-centric desires (Epstein, 1999).

However, having a right interpretation of mindfulness facilitates ‘right mindfulness’, which is crucial to judicious managerial practices of mindfulness (Keevers and Treleaven, 2011). Furthermore, we propose that ‘right mindfulness’ helps managers analyze, verify and explore ethical dilemmas in organizations that require both an understanding of the current situation and the ability to learn from past experiences. Thus we argue that taking a non-extreme approach to mindfulness practices sends a sustained, meaningful and strong message that represents the heart of Buddhist practice. Such an approach involves further investigation of the interrelationship between mindfulness and mindlessness.

# The interrelationships between mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations

Our substantive review of literature highlights close links between mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999; Jordan et al., 2009; Levinthal and Rerup, 2006). According to the theory of mindlessness, in a mindless state, an individual tends to respond to an already structured environment based on pre-existing exposure to information (Chanowitz and Langer, 1980). This may lead to rigid representations of information and premature commitment to the unconditional acceptance of ‘truth’. In a more recent study, Tang et al. (2017) found that mindlessness impacts the process of learning, especially when individuals are prone to ‘old’ thinking patterns and persistent biases.

Furthermore, mindlessness may occur as a consequence of routines. Ancona (1990) argues most organizations’ activities involve routines; and over time people become less mindful of the activities unless problems arise. Organizational routines are “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors” (Feldman and Pentland, 2003: 95). Organizational routines have been defined as the primary means by which organizations achieve their goals (March and Simon, 1958; Nelson and Winter, 1982), especially in assisting bureaucracies to operate efficiently and effectively (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Within organizations, performance-related behavior may be triggered by automatic goal activation without deliberate awareness (George, 2009). Routines serve as a source of accountability and political protection but can also lead to stagnation (Hummel, 1987). Organizational routines can be described as a source of inertia (Hannan and Freeman, 1983), inflexibility (Gersick and Hackman, 1990) and mindlessness (Ashforth and Fried, 1988; Langer, 1989). Repetitive patterns in work routines may create “inertia and blind spots that induce unintended detrimental side-effects of organizational change” (Becke, 2014: 62).

In organizations, the state of mindlessness can also be affected by “scripts” (Ashford and Fried, 1988: 309). Scripts are formed when an “individual gains experience with relatively invariant tasks and role based behaviors”. In organizations, scripts can be troublesome. For instance, repetitive operational routines with close supervision, rules, procedures, standards, and individually accumulated knowledge can lead to automatic performances that lack vigilance or authenticity (Ashford and Fried, 1988). This can impact both managers’ and employees’ abilities to convey effective social responses (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). Scripts are states of mindlessness which, in decision-making, may result in blinkered perceptions, lack of critical thinking and premature closure before an effective solution is identified (Ashford and Fried, 1988). According to Starbuck (1983), serious problems can occur as “scripted” or mindless decision-making procedures tend to be resistant to change (Shiffrin and Schneider, 1977). In stressful circumstances, information processing is reduced, attention is restricted, analysis may be biased or overly simplified, alternatives not considered, and decisions made hastily (Mandler, 1982).

Paradoxically, routines can also be a source of change and flexibility (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). For example, continuous improvement or total quality management can stimulate both organizational flexibility (Pentland and Rueter, 1994) and organizational change (Feldman, 2000; Hackman and Wageman, 1995). Additionally, scripts’ may also foster learning and flexibility (Lord and Kernan, 1987): scripts can be elaborated to include new experiences; generalized to new settings; demonstrate alternative paths to a goal; disrupted by stimuli to get out of ordinary routines; and show mindful and controlled processing (Ashford and Fried, 1988). Organizational routines can promote reliability, accumulated experience, and behaviors that stimulate organizational survival (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006) whilst also sustaining valuable expertise across time (Nelson and Winter, 1982).

On the other hand, mindfulness at an organizational level is crucial in fostering the ability to tackle and respond to rapid, distinct and variable circumstances or challenges (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006). While mindfulness in organizations can be effective in dynamic, ill structured, ambiguous, and unpredictable moments and contexts, mindlessness approaches in the form of routine within organizations can be cost-efficient (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2011). Furthermore, Jordan et al. (2009) argue that both interactive routines and creative work processes facilitate mindfulness at an organizational level. Interactive routines allow employees and managers to mutually and effectively discover the unexpected, and, reflect on learning at organizational levels. Work processes that involve multiple actors in teams and organizational units also facilitate collective reflection on changes at different levels. This approach may achieve mindful changes or mindful decision-making regarding unanticipated or innovative organizational effects (Jordan et al., 2009). Behrens and Bleses (2014) state that dialogue or exchange between employees and managers on a regular and routine basis can transform into mindful processes and structures for change initiatives based on collective and organizational learning. Interestingly and paradoxically, routines that foster mindfulness can “seek to institutionalize surprises and instability rather than stable structures” (Jordan et al., 2009: 469) while stable routines can provide a resource for mindful action (Bigley and Roberts, 2003; Levinthal and Rerup, 2006).

However, attaining positive states of mindlessness in organizations often requires a combination of mindfulness and mindlessness. For instance, organizations have a propensity to develop routines, and as a result teams may become less innovative (Ancona, 1990). However, if a team experiences interruption in the form of a problem during process routines, an automatic performance can be transformed into conscious information-processing techniques, which may eventually lead to new routines (Gersick and Hackman, 1990; Langer, 1989).

There are costs associated with mindfulness practices in organizations (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006; Rerup, 2005). Time, resources, risk, energy and opportunity cost might be appealing in the exploration of opportunities, yet ongoing mindfulness may lead to neglecting or undermining any consensus about or dedication to other essential activities (Levinthal and March, 1993). Arguably, it is not effective to depend on a state of mindfulness in every context. If mindfulness at an organizational level was practiced in an established routine-based context, it could result in dysfunctional outcomes (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006). For example, for some organizations that intentionally build competencies through past experience and routine-based history-dependent systems (Cyert and March, 1963; March and Simon, 1958), mindfulness might represent a risk (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006).

This discussion on mindfulness and mindlessness reveals that in an organizational context, effectiveness does not depend merely on mindfulness. We argue that the states of mindfulness and mindlessness co-exist in organizations in an interactive and interrelated manner. Research on mindlessness highlights the need for less extreme approaches than those that focus solely on promoting mindfulness at the organizational level. The discussion indicates that to attain the state of ‘right mindfulness’ as introduced in the Noble Eightfold Path, experiences of the past and present are equally important, and mindlessness supports the process of slowing down for reflection, which is a crucial part of practicing ‘right mindfulness’. Debates around mindfulness and mindlessness reaffirm the importance of context sensitivity and non-extreme viewpoints that are crucial for understanding managerial experiences. The link between mindfulness and mindlessness has prompted further examination of managerial approaches that combine mindfulness and mindlessness proactively and skillfully.

The following section of this comprehensive review contributes a fuller investigation of the concept of Skillful Means and its underlying notion of non-attachment, which, we argue, bridges the gap between states of mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations and facilitates the learning of skillful management practices.

# Non-attachment and Skillful Means

In Buddhism, most suffering is said to arise from attachments. Gyatso (1984: 5-6) identified that various types of suffering occur from the attachment to, for example, appearance, fame, power, rewards and recognition. The very things we are attracted to can be the source of suffering. For example, moths are attracted to light yet when they attach to light, they die. Such attachment to the pursuit of something is likened to people being trapped inside walls that prevent them from experiencing true freedom. Attachment can be a continuous state; even if one achieves what one wishes, there are always other attachments to pursue and cling to. For instance, if people receive the rewards and praise they seek, it is likely they will expect a promotion. They will experience suffering if this does not occur, and if it does, after momentary satisfaction, they set their sights on the next level of promotion. Attachment to expectations can easily result in discouragement or other forms of negative outcome (suffering) if expectations are not met. The Buddhist concept of non-attachment refers to the rejection of extreme choices manipulated by individual perception that might not be realistic in the given context.

This is salient in the example of the pursuit of “meaningfulness” in organizations. Terkel (1995) states work needs to satisfy a search for meaning and recognition rather than be routine work from Monday to Friday for cash or “daily bread”. Pfeffer (2003) highlights that meaningful work is essential; it encourages people to develop and learn, brings competence and mastery, provides a feeling of purpose, promotes a sense of connection and good relationships with co-workers, and contributes to living an integrated life. Yet, following a Buddhist approach would encourage non-attachment to meaning and purpose. For many people however, if meaning and purpose are not met they may become deeply disillusioned, leave their jobs and go in search of something better. The point is not that meaning and purpose are unimportant; it is the deep attachment to meaning and purpose that causes suffering. Thich (1976) states that Buddhist concepts, whether absorbed with good or bad, powerful or light feelings, should always come together with mindfulness. Understanding attachment and mindfulness can help solve issues relating to desires and suffering when we become aware of how we may cling to certain states or ideals. In Buddhism, it is held that attachment to anything, even a specific practice like mindfulness, may lead to suffering.

We posit that Skillful Meansis key to practicing mindfulness in organizations with non-attachment. Non-attachment sits at the heart of Skillful Means *(Upāya Kausalya)*. Skillful Means is a term mentioned in various Buddhist Sutras and cultivates the ability to adapt the teaching of Dharma[[6]](#footnote-6) according to individual circumstance (Mitchell, 2008). Skillful Means indicates no single teaching or practice is sufficient to cover countless karmic differences in the world (Schroeder, 2004). In Buddhism there are sixty-two paths to enlightenment, each representing various meditation techniques or disciplines. Regrettably, people become attached to particular practices and tend to reduce them to one particular path to fit their beliefs. Hence, the Buddha’s intention to teach non-attachment through Skillful Means. Pye (1978) states that the same doctrine can either be a barrier or a door depending on how it is practiced; and the effectiveness and value of any content in the doctrines is not separate from how it plays itself out in people’s lives. Skillful Means does not limit any knowledge, concerns over laws of nature, truth, causality or the self. It is more about *how* something is taught rather than the *content* of the teaching itself. Skillful Means highlights how the Buddha himself contextualized and adapted his version of truth to different sentient beings and contexts (Gombrich, 1996). Buddha demonstrated the Dharma in numerous examples of karmic reasoning[[7]](#footnote-7), forms of words and wealth of Skillful Means towards the path of enlightenment (Kern, 1989; Lindtner, 1986). For some, advice was offered; others received philosophical explanations of reality, or reprimands; and there are occasions when Buddha just kept silence about his teachings about truth due to the contextual needs of his audience (Schroeder, 2004).

In contemporary organizational contexts, Skillful Means is applicable in various ways. For instance, recent studies by Bailey and Madden (2016, 2017) indicate that meaningfulness arises in “transcendent moments in time” and not as sustained states of being. This reflects the notion of impermanence[[8]](#footnote-8) and non-attachment in Buddhism because the state of meaningfulness is indefinite, and subject to change and re-negotiation by employees due to contextual considerations (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). Nevertheless, employees tend to be attached to their own perceptions or interpretations of ‘meaningfulness’ based on their own comfort zone, expectations of fairness, obligation, or the self-fulfilling tasks they are doing. Whilst having these expectations is not wrong, being overly attached, with high (sometimes false or overreaching) expectations can be problematic, especially when external conditions and constraints pose necessary organizational and structural changes that require employees to reconsider or find other angles of ‘meaningfulness’ in their tasks with a context-sensitive manner. Skillful Means can help individuals to skillfully adapt positive perceptions flexibly, without extreme attachments to expectations.

Skillful Means thus stimulates context-sensitive mindfulness approaches in organizations and assists managers to make sense of context, based on observations and past experience, not just ‘moment’ awareness. Given this understanding of Skillful Means, the following questions may be relevant: Are employees physically and mentally prepared for mindfulness practices? Do they actually understand what mindfulness is and the consequences of it? Does mindfulness really facilitate organizational effectiveness? Can experiences from the past deal with the current situation? Why invest more in mindfulness training interventions if there are sufficient available resources? In asking these questions, managers and leaders can provide contextualized decision-making without imposing personal ideologies that result in the commodification of mindfulness in organizations.

In summary, Buddhist Skillful Means provides a concept that can be applied in various disciplines. However, it has not been explored in the field of management and especially in management learning.

# Revisiting the concept of mindfulness from the Buddhist Skillful Means approach

Mindfulness originates from Buddhism, and its true power is revealed only if it is understood and practiced based on the fundamental Buddhist principle of non-attachment. Arguably, right mindfulness can be achieved only if it is not attached to any corporate purpose, deliberate strategy or sophisticated hidden agenda.

Considering mindfulness as a Skillful Means with non-attachment also helps organizations to be sensitive to diversity. Indeed, considering the state of mindfulness through Skillful Means may stimulate the discovery and use of different managerial methods, techniques, and principles applicable to diverse contexts. For instance, mindfulness as a Skillful Means can be a moderating tool to avoid extreme approaches to spiritual diversity in organizations. Adopting mindful and context-sensitive managerial approaches that reflect on past experiences and lessons as well as the current situation enables managers to decide whether to allow or restrict religious or spiritual expressions that do not jeopardize personal belief systems or cultural norms in the organization. If conflicts related to religious or spiritual expressions occur, managers/leaders may ask questions such as: Does the conflict affect other members of the organization? Does it come from extreme ideologies or from misinterpretations? Can members come to an understanding and learn from the conflict? The aim would be to find contextually appropriate solutions that eradicate harmful conflicts and harmonize negotiable conflicts to create a positive learning environment.

Amaro (2015) highlights that Skillful Means techniques can be applied in any belief system; if the intention is to make lives better then respect for diverse faiths can be maintained. Even the Buddha realized the need to respond to the world in different ways with a variety of philosophical and religious views developed to suit the context of his audience (Schroeder, 2004). He considered his teachings valuable only if they were appropriate to the context and the audience. Therefore, the adaptation of mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations should avoid coercion that might minimize cultural dimensions, socio-historical contexts, personal freedom, the individual as the source of authority, and self-authenticity, all of which contradict the Buddhist principle of non-self (Purser, 2015). Rather the state of mindfulness or mindlessness in organizations involves collective mindfulness practices that encourage dialogue. This would enhance the experience of sharing and learning, bringing people together for common good (Purser, 2015: 43).

In summary, non-attachment is the heart of Skillful Means; and Skillful Means is the heart of Buddhist compassion (Schroeder, 2004). When based on the Buddhist principle of non-attachment, Skillful Means offers a technique for transferring mindfulness practices in ways that respect organizational and individual differences. We argue such an approach would promote effective organizational outcomes either in dynamic, ill-structured, ambiguous and unpredictable systems or in routine-based and history-dependent ones (Cyert and March, 1963; March and Simon, 1958). Skillful Means represents a “mindful” tool to balance the impact of mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations appropriately, flexibly and practically.

# Practical implications for organizational and management learning

Mindfulness and mindlessness in organizations, if practiced with Skillful Means, can take account of routines and accommodate change and context. The art behind such balance is based on non-attachment and compassion, which contributes a practice that is flexible and context-sensitive and respects various perspectives, whether it is Eastern or Western based.

In response to contemporary managerial and organizational learning we contribute a **Five-Fold Framework** with practical implications for five aspects of a skillful mindful and mindless approach: context-flexibility, managerial emotional display, managerial learning under complex situations and dilemmas, transferring mindfulness practices from individual to organizational level, and context-sensitive research.

***First***, ***context-flexibility.*** Context plays a salient role in organizations and needs to be addressed skillfully for effective managerial outcomes. A Skillful Means approach helps managers gain a practical sense of collective awareness without self-fixations (Brummans et al., 2013). The aim is to encourage organizational members to be in full “contact with the realities and needs of the situation and unencumbered by the strategies of the self-centered ego or by preconceptions or methods” (Rosch, 2008, p.153). For instance, in a Sri Lankan context whist the literature shows that Buddhist principles support sustainable practices (Daniels, 2007, 2011), findings, however, suggest that in Sri Lanka – a Buddhist country – Buddhism is not influential in the field of corporate sustainability or in how corporate sustainability is reported (Abeydeera et al., 2016). If a business wants to pursue business opportunities in Sri Lanka and ‘mindlessly’ assume that as a Buddhist country, Sri Lanka must follow sustainable practices in business, this ‘mindless’ assumption can lead to ineffective and context-insensitive implementation of managerial approaches. In this case, a skillful, practical, mindful, and reflexive interpretation of the context is needed to reject overemphasis on prior assumptions to facilitate context-sensitive managerial approaches.

On the other hand, the study of Keevers and Treleaven (2011) on an Australian non-government counseling organization – the West Street Centre – showed that both routines and surprise are bound together in organizing at West Street, reflecting a reflexive practice that involves a skillful combination of mindful and mindless approaches. Routine engagement in practices of reflectionand critical reflexivity allows managers to pause or slow down to explore connections, reflecting on what has been done and what needs to be done to move forward. In other words, Skillful Means can be an act of deliberative practices of mindfulness (Keevers and Treleaven, 2011). In addition, we agree with Cassirer (1944) that mindlessness is not necessarily an act of habitual blindness, but can be a pragmatic skillful approach that buys time for managers to look for resources, examining existing opportunities reflexively rather than making unwise decisions whenever there are expectations for change. Our approach supports the view that as managers face multi-foci realities and complex contemporary organizational issues, it is useful to have observations ‘from the within’ and critical thinking ‘from the outside’ by acknowledging past experiences, re-assessing the present situation and exploring future opportunities and challenges (Hernes and Irgens, 2012; Shotter, 2006; Zundel, 2013).

***Second, managerial emotional display.*** A skillful mindful and mindless approach addresses concerns over how managers should learn to define and express their own emotions and identities while finding alternatives for managing others’ emotional lives (Fineman, 1997). We acknowledge two important issues here: (1) when is it useful to be mindful or mindless of emotional display? And (2) how authentic can managers and leaders be in managing their identities or emotions? For instance, if mindless or free expressions of emotions reflect authenticity that may not achieve emotional intelligence and managerial effectiveness, mindful emotional display can be a form of unauthentic management and leadership practices for personal ‘end’ purposes.

In this interpretation of Skillful Means, there is no universal effective managerial practice applicable to every context, nor a universal mindful way of expressing emotions. For instance, unskillful free expressions of personal emotions or critical expressions may very likely be considered offensive in Eastern face-saving cultures compared to Western cultures (Agyekum, 2002; Tuafuti, 2010). Therefore, a mindful emotional display can also be authentic as long as managers consider the context of their audiences and display emotions that are supportive and show compassion when encouraging personal development.

***Third***, ***managerial learning under complex situations and dilemmas.*** A skillful mindful and mindless approach facilitates management learning under complex situations and dilemmas by embracing flexibility and critical pragmatism. Brookfield (2001: 20) refers to this as the “flexible pursuit of beautiful consequences” that enhances human creativity. Thus, the concept of non-attachment of Skillful Means contributes to management learning by providing a view of being in the world and understanding the world from the Buddhist principle of impermanence. In this sense, management learning is a continuous process that is limitless and contextually formed. This approach resembles what Izak (2015: 99) describes as emergent and continuous learning established by different rationalities, “unfixed from a viewpoint of any given conceptual framework”. Even calculative and results-driven managerial approaches are temporary, suggesting a more contemplative approach that embraces eventfulness of situations, temperance, sensitivity, and reflection rather than imposing fixed interpretations or predetermined outcomes (Brummans, 2014; Chia and Holt, 2008; Heidegger, 2006; Zundel, 2013).

Non-attachment releases mental fixations of the ‘self’, fostering managers’ abilities to be mindful in acknowledging other organizational players’ voices. Learning from the different perspectives of different organizational players facilitates collective mindfulness, which helps both managers and organizational members understand the context better. The notion of non-attachment therefore fosters the exchange of feedback, experiences and dialogues from different perspectives and provides opportunities for organizational triple-loop learning (Tosey et al., 2011).

Another example of how a skillful mindful and mindless approach can facilitate managerial or leadership learning can be considered from the context of institutionalized bribery in Vietnam. Bribery and corruption are considered unethical in the West; however, the same behaviours are often accepted as institutionalized common practice in the developing world (Davis and Ruhe, 2003). A number of companies make choices in such a way that they spend more resources (time and money) on bribery to build up relationships at the cost of allocating less effort and fewer resources for product innovation. For example, in the pharmaceutical industry, this has led to many suppliers compromising the quality of their products (Nguyen et al., 2016). If such choices are widespread, serious consequences affecting the nation’s healthcare system will arise.

We posit that a Skillful Means approach for managers and organizations in an institutionalized system of this sort is needed to observe ‘within’ and ‘outside’. It facilitates contextual sense-making for managers by retrieving what they might have forgotten, blending detached, absorbed and mindful coping to reduce and explore the equivocality (Guiette and Vandenbempt, 2016; Weick and Westley, 1999) of contemporary contexts. For instance, in the case of Vietnam, even if managers accept the necessary but minimum institutionalized transactional costs in exchange for favourable conditions that save time and help them stay competitive, they will be able to continue introducing needed products and services in a timely manner to meet customers’ demand. ‘Ethics’ is a relative term and has different meanings in different circumstances; and in this specific context, it is more important to stay ethical in terms of providing patients the medical care they need. Therefore, managers may make sense of transactional cost in this specific context. In the case of Vietnam, if managers and leaders are too mindful about doing the right things or being ‘ethical’ in their own terms and ignoring the ‘mindless fact’ of the institutionalized lack of transparency in the Vietnamese system due to weak law enforcement, it will not help their businesses.

However, this does not mean that Skillful Means focuses on short-term purposes to maximize profits by making sense of the context by all means. Earlier, we emphasized that the basis of Skillful Means is compassion and non-attachment. Therefore, some managers may hold a view that accepting transactional bribery is a contextually relevant and compassionate way to help patients in need in the particular context of Vietnam, but it cannot be applied in every context, or necessarily in other industries and countries. Skillful Means can demonstrate its whole meaning and power in practice only if it is initiated in the relevant context out of compassion. It encourages managerial exploration of potential contextual and ethical contradictions and heightens awareness for both decision-making and management learning. Therefore, we suggest combining mindful and mindless approaches without fixation or extreme attachment to any single approach or context promotes managers’ ability in contextual sense-making, especially in dynamic complex contexts.

***Fourth***, ***transferring mindfulness practices from the individual to the organizational level.*** Our introduction of Skillful Means supports the view of Purser and Milillo (2015) and suggests revisiting how scholarly conversations position mindfulness in organizations. Our view is that mindfulness is an individual choice of practice, based on individual physical and psychological abilities. As such, mindfulness cannot be generalized as secular mindfulness practices to promote a universal solution to all types of contemporary problems and suffering (Hyland, 2015; Purser and Loy, 2013). This is also evident in the recent findings of Vu and Gill (2017) reaffirming the importance of respecting individual differences and customizing mindfulness practices in organizations. For managers it is important to recognize this and to consider whether to introduce mindfulness practices in organizations.

***Fifth, context-sensitive research.*** This framework responds to the call by Linstead et al. (2014) to promote research that is sensitive to context, multi-perspective and multi-disciplinary, incorporating theories from multiple disciplines. For organization studies contextualized managerial practices and organizational theories have cross-cultural application while respecting distinctive local characteristics.

**Conclusions and future directions**

The aim of this article has been to demonstrate a useful and practical vehicle that advances conceptual understanding of the interrelationship between mindfulness and mindlessness within organizations for organizational and management learning. By highlighting the relevance and roles of both mindfulness and mindlessness as having purpose and value in organizations, we reaffirm the importance of revisiting the practice of ‘right mindfulness’ at both individual and organizational levels that promote wisdom-based and ethics-based states of mindfulness that recognize both past and current experiences. Through a thoroughgoing exploration of Skillful Means as inherent to mindful and mindless approaches, we developed a Five-fold framework and in doing so advance the literature of management learning. In particular, we propose collective learning in organizations through skillful, context-sensitive, and reflexive managerial approaches to respond to contemporary organizational dilemmas or institutional constraints (Ferraro et al, 2015). We call for further empirical studies in different contexts to further examine: the use of Skillful Means in attending to situational ethics or ethical dilemmas in different contexts; the use and impact of Skillful Means in examining managerial and leadership authenticity through multiple identities and exploration of the use of Skillful Means in cross-cultural managerial environments.

Debates whether the means are justified by the ends from religious standpoints are beyond the scope of this article. We also acknowledge that our approach may pose some concerns, and may be rendered as yet another inauthentic manipulative pragmatic approach that lends itself to be exploited in organizations. We emphasize that Skillful Means is only ‘skillful’ when it is practiced out of compassion, without clinging to personal ‘ends’, which involves the process of continuous learning, including the reflexive learning from managerial failures.

*“You only lose what you cling to.” – Guatama Buddha*

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1. collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Diamond Sūtra (Sanskrit:*Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*): collection of scriptures in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A Mahāyānan Buddhist Sūtra [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Noble Eightfold Path (Pali: *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*; Sanskrit: *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*) consists of eight practices: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, and right mindfulness to liberate suffering and ignorance. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Non-self (Pali: *anattā*; Sanskrit: *anātman*) - the ability to let go of the ego or ‘self’ and the associated desires leading to suffering. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dharma – refers to Buddhist philosophy/the Buddha’s teachings [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Karma (Sanskrit: *karman*; Pāli: *kamma*) – refers to causal effect and depending arising of phenomena to rationalize consequences of actions [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Impermanence (Pāli: *anicca*; Sanskrit: *anitya*) – refers to the constant change of phenomena in the universe [↑](#footnote-ref-8)