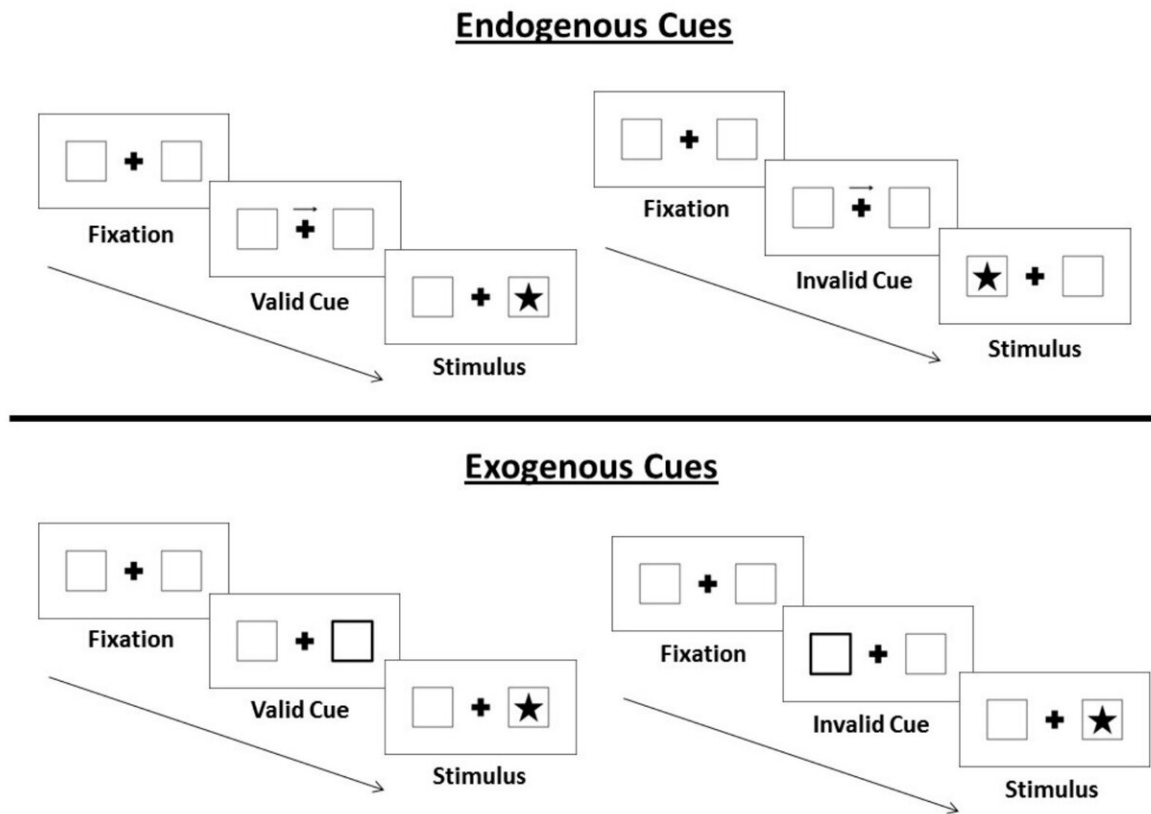


Philosopher argues that mindfulness rests on dubious philosophical foundations

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Schematic description of the Posner paradigm. *Engaging mindfulness*, (2023).

Recent years have seen an explosive growth in mindfulness, which has been adapted from Buddhist meditation practices. In schools, health

services and workplaces, different forms of therapy based on mindfulness are on offer, and meditation apps such as Headspace and Ten Percent Happier are downloaded by millions of people all over the world.

In other words, there is no doubt that mindfulness is fulfilling a need and that many feel that they are being helped by the techniques it offers. But according to Ph.D. Odysseus Stone from the University of Copenhagen, many of the philosophical assumptions about human beings and their relationship to the world on which mindfulness is based are quite dubious and should be examined carefully.

"One of the key claims of mindfulness is that we should learn to view thoughts and emotions that come and go in the mind as if they are clouds passing through the sky. This is an image that you often come across in mindfulness literature. The idea is that we must acknowledge our thoughts and emotions and notice them as events in the mind, but not invest them with importance or spend too much time worrying about them. And this, of course, may sometimes make sense," explains Odysseus Stone, who has just completed his dissertation on mindfulness.

"Consider, for example, if you are to make a presentation at work that you are nervous about. Then it might be sensible to practice mindfulness by acknowledging the nervousness, but trying to avoid letting it take up too much of your energy."

He adds, "However, it doesn't stop there. In mindfulness, this notion is supposed to apply to all our thoughts and emotions, or at least mindfulness offers no clear way of drawing the line. But this quickly becomes highly problematic. Consider our deeply-held convictions and attitudes about ourselves, other people, and the social and political world around us. Take, for example, feelings of anger that we might have about the policy decisions of the Danish government.

"Is it beneficial to view such emotions as if they are passing clouds in the sky with little importance or relation to reality? We should remember that our thoughts and feelings form our perspective on—and open us up to—the world. They cannot and should not all be treated with suspicion."

Control your (own) attention

All the major tech companies are vying for our [attention](#), which thus has become one of the most precious raw materials in the so-called attention economy. For Netflix, Facebook, Amazon or Apple, it's all about getting us to spend our limited time on their platforms.

"Attention is also a key theme within mindfulness, where a number of exercises that train practitioners to control their attention are often highlighted as a form of solution to the information overload we are exposed to. It's all about taking back control, and this is a central component of mindfulness-inspired treatment of stress. In many ways, this is also sensible. We all know the feeling of being highly distracted because of [digital technologies](#)," says Stone.

"But I would say that mindfulness's focus on the individual's attention makes major structural social problems, such as the attention economy, a matter for the individual rather than something that we need to solve together. This criticism has also been raised in the context of workplace stress, where employees with stress are offered a course in mindfulness rather than changing working conditions. In both cases, the wider structures that give rise to the problems are not being addressed through mindfulness," he adds.

But this is not the only problem with the way mindfulness conceives of attention: "In addition, we may also question the way in which mindfulness views attention itself. Often attention is seen as a bit like a little spotlight inside the head of the individual that can learn to be

controlled. According to some philosophers and cognitive scientists, however, this picture is all wrong. Our attention is highly dependent on our embodiment, and is embedded in a material and social context," Stone continues.

Can you live in the present?

An equally important part of mindfulness's philosophical foundation is the idea that we humans spend far too much of our time pondering the past and the future. These thoughts prevent us from living in the present, which we should focus our attention on instead. In general, we should strive to be present in our lives here and now.

"This is an idea that many others than [mindfulness](#) practitioners subscribe to. Often it is based on the philosophical idea that the present moment is especially real or fundamental, or at least more real than the past and the future. On this view, our sense of ourselves as beings with a past and future—our 'narrative' sense of ourselves—is based on a kind of mistake," says Stone.

"However, it is not clear that we should accept this idea either. On the one hand, our narratives give our lives meaning and structure. It is not clear that they are simply unreal or mistaken. On the other hand, if we ask, 'What exactly is this pure now or absolute [present moment](#) that is supposed to be especially real?' it is very difficult to answer. If our experiences and actions are to be coherent and to make sense and make sense to us, they will have to refer to our past and future in one way or the other," he concludes.

More information: Odysseus Stone, [Engaging mindfulness: a phenomenological investigation and critique](#) (2023).

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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