Clifford Symposium Focuses Attention on the Art and Science of Mindfulness

MIDDLEBURY, Vt. — While it is implicit that the practice of mindfulness can improve a person’s attention span, cognitive neuroscientist Amishi Jha also showed that mindfulness can have other far-reaching benefits during her keynote address for the Clifford Symposium at Middlebury College on September 22.

The practice of mindfulness can also have positive effects upon an individual’s physical health, mental condition, and interpersonal relationships, the associate professor from the University of Miami explained to more than 250 students, faculty, staff and community members gathered at Robison Hall in the Mahaney Center for the Arts.

Her illustrated, 50-minute lecture, which was also simulcast to a gathering at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, discussed what is mindfulness, showed the connection between mindfulness and attention, explained some of the myths about mindfulness, and touched upon research being performed on the topic, including work in her own laboratory.

Jha defined mindfulness as “a mental mode characterized by attention to the present moment experience without conceptual elaboration or emotional reactivity.” Mindfulness is not a way to shut down all thoughts, nor is it a deep breathing exercise, a relaxation technique, or way to achieve a special state of being. It is, on the other hand, a way that a wandering mind can be controlled to improve concentration and enhance learning.

Mindfulness has been shown to minimize pain, reduce hypertension, lessen the effects of anxiety and PTSD, and improve marital and workplace relationships, Jha said.

But given that her talk was part of a three-day symposium titled “Fully Present: The Art and Science of Mindful Engagement,” and that her own topic was “Strengthening the Brain’s Attention System with Mindfulness Training,” the guest speaker kept circling back to the benefits of mindfulness training for students in higher education.

College students today are under a good deal of stress, and a stressed mind is a wandering mind, she said. Mindfulness training teaches individuals to focus on the subject at hand and shut out distractions. “It is a low-tech, self-guided way to help your own attention span. And the more you practice it, the more it can actually help you.”

Mindfulness training helps students build “cognitive resilience” and strengthen their focus on their academics. Professor Jha demonstrated a mindfulness training exercise by asking audience members to sit comfortably for a few moments and concentrate only on their breathing. Do not let your mind wander, she said; try to shut out all thoughts and think only about how the cool air passes through your nostrils or how the very act of breathing affects your body.

Middlebury President Laurie L. Patton introduced Amishi Jha and said she is excited about the neuroscientist's work “and its implications for us in higher education.” We are learning how best to promote resilience among students “by using contemplative mind-training techniques that strengthen the brain’s attention networks,” the president said.

The 2016 Clifford Symposium was organized to promote engagement and dialogue "to create a common conversation, a common sense of purpose, and, in the case of mindfulness, a sense of common practice" among all sectors of the Middlebury community, Patton added.

During the symposium there was a lecture on the discipline of looking, and panel discussions about mindfulness in
performance, mindfulness in the lives of students, and ways to teach mindfulness in different academic disciplines. There was a documentary film screening and discussion, and a community dinner (preceded by a meditation session) at the Middlebury Organic Farm.

Other events in the annual symposium that honors Professor Emeritus of History Nicholas R. Clifford included an interactive workshop, a poster session, and contemplative practice samplers in yoga, aikido, tai chi, modern qi dong, and meditation.

All of the sessions were designed to address the science supporting the effects of mindfulness practice on cognitive performance, general well-being, teaching and learning, creative engagement and compassionate leadership.

— With reporting by Robert Keren, photo by Trent Campbell, and videos by Middlebury Media Services.