Keynote Speaker Unpacks Mindfulness

by Elizabeth Zhou, *The Middlebury Campus*

What is mindfulness, and why does everyone keep talking about it? These two basic questions served as the focal point of this year’s Clifford Symposium, entitled “Fully Present: The Art and Science of Mindful Engagement.”

Last Thursday, Sep. 22, the College hosted Amishi Jha, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, as the keynote speaker, who provided context to a weekend packed with mindfulness-based events.

In a talk that filled the Mahaney Center of the Arts Concert Hall with faculty, staff, students and community members, Jha examined the effects of mindfulness training on the brain’s attention system to answer the underlying question of this year’s symposium: why does mindfulness matter?

“The human brain is exquisite in mental time travel,” Jha stated.

To offer a metaphor, she explained the parallels between the mind and an MP3 player. Rumination on the past is represented by the reverse button, while the tendency to worry and plan ahead is likened to the fast forward button. Meanwhile, the play button symbolizes the ability to pay attention to the present moment experience. According to mindfulness studies, this is the foundation upon which our mental wellbeing rests.

Any fear that the lecture would consist of rambling, jargon-filled prose was quickly dispelled by Jha’s engaging demeanor and accessible language. She offered a simple definition for the often misunderstood concept of mindfulness: a “mental mode characterized by attention to present moment experience, without conceptual elaboration or emotional reactivity.”

Contrary to popular belief, mindfulness does not entail the shutting down of all thoughts, deep breathing or relaxation techniques. Nor does one need to practice mindfulness for hours or years in order to see results.

Assuring the audience that mindfulness is not an “esoteric, mystical way to achieve a special state of being” like levitation, Jha joked, “I’ve never had anyone hit the ceiling. It’s been very safe.”

While stress degrades the brain, mindfulness leads to mental enhancement. Why does this happen? Because, as Jha aptly put it, “A stressed mind is a wandering mind.”

For any audience members who remained unconvinced, Jha provided a neurological explanation for the power of mindfulness to combat mind-wandering.

Different brain networks become activated when we engage in different activities: the salience network controls the act of noticing, the central executive network selects and maintains and the default mode is connected to mind-wandering. These three parts are antagonistic, working against each other and competing for the limited resources of the mind. Without mindfulness training during periods of high stress, the consequences of mind-wandering become pronounced, causing attention and performance to decline.

Jha put this theory to test in her own psychology lab at the University of Miami, in which researchers sought to simulate mind-wandering by asking subjects to participate in a sustained attention response task. The 18-minute task was specifically designed to provoke boredom and thus mind-wandering in subjects. Results found that poor performance correlated with mental disorders and poor sleeping patterns. In other words, increased levels of mind-wandering correlated with poor psychological fitness.

Previously, humans have attempted to tame the brain through medications, psychotherapy and computer-based
training. Mindfulness differs from these treatments in its low-tech, self-guided nature: this is a form of psychological fitness that requires no doctor's note or hefty paycheck.

A 2014 study cited by Jha found that the impact of mindfulness training was equivalent to the impact of antidepressants, without the toxic side effects. Overall, research has pointed to the beneficial results of mindfulness on the body, mind and social relationships, touching on everything from chronic pain to depression to workplace dynamics.

Popular media has helped to fuel the mindfulness movement, as major corporations, politicians, veterans and athletes have publicly advocated for its positive effects. However, Jha was quick to note that in order to be responsible consumers of science, we must acknowledge the limits of existing research on the topic.

“The power of positive thinking skews mindfulness studies,” she stated. In other words, the growing mainstream popularity of mindfulness has created an echo chamber in which positive news articles are sensationalized and inconclusive studies are ignored rather than examined.

Over 300,000 articles were needed to establish the cultural understanding that daily physical exercise is good. Currently, only 2,000-3,000 such articles exist for mindfulness. What is more, researchers have engaged mostly in reverse inference about functional brain changes in relation to mindfulness – which means that they cannot say with certainty that causation occurred; they simply observed something and assumed the cause. This ambiguousness suggests that much more research is necessary before we can arrive to any sweeping conclusions on the topic.

Speaking clearly and concisely, Jha provided a perspective on mindfulness that managed to acknowledge both its status as an uncertain newcomer to the scientific field and its potential to radically transform the way we take care of ourselves. For many audience members, perhaps the gift that had been bestowed to them as they filtered into the hall earlier in the evening – a small, smooth, gray stone with the words “fully present” etched onto the surface – attained a newfound clarity.

As Jha made her closing remarks – “To end, thank you for your attention” – the hall burst into applause, a spell seemed to break over the audience.

The contemplative silence that had permeated the air only seconds before dissolved. People began rising from their seats, waving to friends and teachers from a few aisles over and – in an automatic, ironic reaction to a presentation on the importance of grounding oneself in the present moment – checking their phones for new notifications. But as the crowd dispersed slowly into the night, perhaps it was with a more thoughtful awareness that individuals noticed the weight of their bags on their shoulders, the feeling of their shoes against the concrete and the sight of the stars twinkling overhead.