

The self: A blind spot in mindfulness-based approaches to sustainability

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Humanity is knowingly heading into a socioecological crisis and science has spent decades trying to understand this paradox of conscious (self-)destruction. In the process of searching for answers, mindfulness practices from the health sector have been applied in the sustainability discourse, hypothesizing they can support sustainable lifestyles. Evidence for this hypothesis, however, is still weak, possibly owing to methodological factors. Other reasons may include our understanding of mindfulness and why we practice it. In this regard, we revisited the traditional Buddhist roots of mindfulness alongside literature on secular mindfulness, (environmental) psychology, sociology and sustainability. There we discovered an unconsidered theme, a blind spot, in our search for explanations and solutions to society's self-destructive tendencies: our understanding of "self" and our existential awareness.

"Existential awareness" here refers to our sense of "self" and reality, and is modulated through contemplative practice along gradients from reification to dereification. Importantly, dereification addresses a hidden discrepancy between our theoretical understanding of "self" as a compounded phenomenon or reflexive awareness, and our experience of "self" as a reified, seemingly independent entity. Interestingly, such a reification of "self" seems to have crept into and become commonplace in sustainability discourse, too. There, this "self" is treated as possessing those values, norms, beliefs, motivations, and identities that are commonly studied as drivers of environmental degradation. Considering the Buddhist teachings, however, one may argue that this reification of "self" co-emerges with dualistic notions of reality and corresponding mind-sets that are detrimental to pro-environmental behavior and sustainability.

In our view, tackling the socioecological crisis requires a deeper understanding of mindfulness, and how it can support dereified modes of existential awareness and "self" in relation to sustainability. This is inevitably linked to a critical reflection of our culturally and scientifically shaped perspectives on "self" and reality. We suggest this will help unravel hidden conditions underlying the socioecological crisis and potential pathways out of it.