

Abstract of thesis entitled:

Mindfulness in the face of death

Submitted by CHAN, Tsz Ying Amy

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology

at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in November 2015

### **Abstract**

The fear of death coupled with the desire to live are intrinsic to human existence. According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), the natural instinct to deny and suppress death awareness can engender defensive mechanisms which lead to a wide range of destructive behaviors. Yet, mindfulness, encompassing the psychological qualities that entail embracing present-moment experience with a nonattached stance, has the potential to counteract the instinctual death denial tendency and to channel death awareness into pro-social forces.

This paper aimed to 1) explore the relationship between death attitudes and mindfulness-related attributes; 2) dissect the causality between mindfulness and death fear, and 3) explore how dispositional attributes like mindfulness and nonattachment may influence the individual's receptivity toward mindfulness training in death fear defense. A series of three studies were conducted to provide answers on the aforementioned objectives.

In Study 1, 137 participants were recruited to fill out a set of questionnaires to measure their death attitudes and mindfulness-related attributes (i.e. mindfulness, nonattachment and peace of mind). Correlational analysis indicated that mindfulness-

related attributes were associated with more adaptive death approach which characterized by less death fear and avoidance and the capacity to view death as a natural process. Regression analysis result also suggested that nonattachment could predict death attitudes to a greater extent than the conventional mindfulness conceptualization captured by the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ). Study 2 was intended as a pilot trial to replicate the TMT paradigm using local college samples. The result suggested that similar to the TMT findings obtained among the Western studies, the current sample exhibited similar pattern of worldview defense following mortality salience (MS) induction. In Study 3A, 180 participants were randomized into either mindfulness training or psychoeducation followed by MS or control induction. In addition to using worldview defense as a proxy of assessing death terror, fatalism was included as previous research showed that Chinese may defend against death fear by resigning to fate. Result indicated that mindfulness training was able to reduce worldview defense, but contrary to prediction, increase fatalism. Extended from Study 3A, Study 3B further demonstrated that brief mindfulness training was more effective in reducing mortality defense among those who scored low on mindfulness-related traits.

Theoretically, being the first series of empirical studies drawing the causal linkage between mindfulness and death fear, it paves the way for further exploration behind the mechanism of death terror, particularly in the search for reversing the malicious consequence of death fear into something benevolent. Practically, this study demonstrated that even a brief mindfulness training was capable of helping individuals overcoming mortal anxiety. It shows promise not only in the area of death education and

personal improvement, but also in the de-escalation of social conflict and promoting compassionate behaviors.