

## **Listening Mindfully**

How the daily practice of Mindfulness will make you a better Thinking Partner

*This short piece draws a link between Mindfulness and some of the components of a Thinking Environment™ and touches on how the formal observation practices of Mindfulness can deepen the quality of Attention one is able to offer in a Thinking Partnership. Not all the thoughts have been pinned down into a tidy stream of prose, as new thinking has an annoying habit of continuing to emerge, then needing to be inserted somewhere and the edges neatened up around it, which has not always happened....*

To be an effective Thinking Partner™ is to proffer alert, present, non-judgmental and attentive silence to another while they are thinking. The person being listened to, the Thinker, is held in a benevolent field of attention, free of competition, in which the quality of the listening, is a “listening to ignite thinking” not a “listening to reply”. Such Attention is enabled by the 10 components of a Thinking Environment™ and generates new and fresh thinking that would not have been possible without this quality of attention.

While words such as these touch some of the qualities of what has become known as Generative Attention there is as yet no one definition for it.

On the other hand much time and thought has gone into trying to define Mindfulness where the most cited definition, as it has evolved in various mindfulness-based interventions through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, is:

*Mindfulness is paying attention, on purpose, moment-to-moment, with an attitude of non-judgment, curiosity and openness<sup>1</sup>*

On another occasion Kabat-Zinn (cited in Cullen et al. 2006) described mindfulness as:

*affectionate attention in which an orientation of non-harming is inherent.*

From these it seems that the Thinking Environment's Generative Attention bears a strong resemblance to Mindfulness in terms of how that has been defined, and that these definitions could quite plausibly be used as part of a working definition of Generative Attention. This is probably not a coincidence and there appears to be some link between awareness and generative attention and consequentially a possible symbiosis between the Thinking Environment and Mindfulness. The link may be that these both arise out of a common source; sharing their essence while taking different forms

To test this a quick comparison of some of the components of a Thinking Environment, other than Attention, and some of the "components" of Mindfulness may reveal further similarities....

For example, Mindfulness requires deep observation, and detached acceptance, of reality for what it is, not for how we would like it to be. One experience is not judged better or worse than another, less or more desirable, good or bad. As a practice it requires the individual to accept with openness and curiosity what is presenting, without attempting to judge or manipulate that in anyway.

This resonates with the components of Diversity and Equality, allowing for difference, not judging that difference, encouraging that difference while not choosing it over something else, this permission for things to be as they are is generative in nature and "removes obstacles and releases energy".

This rigorous practice, of seeing things as they are there, is expressed succinctly in the words of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

*"Facing the bluntness of reality is the highest form of sanity"*

This speaks to the relationship between Mindfulness and the component of Information as “dismantling denial” is central to it.

The practice of Loving Kindness, *metta*, is integral to the tradition through which Mindfulness, as it is understood in the West, has evolved. *Metta* is an altruistic attitude of love and friendliness, it is the strong wish for the welfare and happiness of others. The attending to self and all others with love is key to engendering tolerance, patience, respect and acceptance. Loving Kindness is mirrored in the Positive Philosophical Choice and the components of Appreciation and Encouragement, and these aspects of the Thinking Environment can be deepened through the practice of loving kindness meditations....

So there are clearly links and to what extent can other Mindfulness practices support the practice of being a Thinking Environment practitioner?

The Three Streams™ of Attention asks that the Thinking Partner give full attention to not only what the Thinker is saying but also to her own internal responses/reactions while listening. In addition she must hold awareness of the ten components and track their presence or absence.

The applying of attention to what is being said, while holding in awareness one’s own thoughts and feelings, without being distracted or caught up by them, is essentially a mindfulness practice.

Formal mindfulness practices each use an anchor for the attention of the practitioner. The anchor is usually an experience, manifesting moment by moment, to which the practitioner gives her full attention, non-judgmentally.

The most familiar formal sitting practice has its roots in *Anapanya* meditation, where the anchor is the breath; attention focuses on each new breath as it arises and passes away, arises and passes away, each time that the practitioner becomes aware that his attention has wandered he returns it to the sensation of breathing, allowing it to focus and gather in the rhythm of the breath. What the practitioner observes in the process is the nature of the mind which has a habit

of wandering, he notices how repeatedly his attention on the moment is interrupted by mental events, ruminations about past events, thoughts about the future, day dreams and others fantasies.

Each time the attention is interrupted the practitioner notices this, with curiosity and then, with kindness, shift the attention back to the anchor. This constant non-judgmental attention become generative, the meditator becomes a Thinking Partner to herself and in that space new awareness, new understanding new intelligence flows. In the words of Nisagadhartha Maharaj, describing mindfulness:

*By being with yourself, by watching yourself in daily life  
With alert interest,  
With the intention to understand rather than to judge,  
In full acceptance of whatever may emerge,  
Because it is there,*

*You encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and  
consciousness with its captive energies.  
This is the great work of Awareness.*

*It removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of  
life and Mind.  
Intelligence is the door to Freedom,  
And alert attention is the Mother of intelligence*

In the words of Nancy Kline describing the Thinking Partner:

*But his attention and its silence took courage. They do. They take courage  
to trust the intelligence unfolding in front of us. And they take courage to  
source our own best self in response.<sup>2</sup>*

Both speak to how Attention unfolds intelligence

Physical sensations in the body can also be used as the anchor, as is the case with *Vipassana* meditation. Other anchors can be the movement of the feet and body in walking meditation, the body posture and position in Hatha yoga, and the sensations of taste, touch and smell in mindful eating... and so on.

As the practice deepens the practitioner becomes more and more an impartial witness to the experiences and notices more and more swiftly when attention has wandered, when judgment has crept in. As the capacity for focused attention and concentration grows and the tolerance of, and non-attachment to, a particular experience deepens the practice shifts to a place of choice-less awareness where the practitioner is still in the present moment, observing sensations and events as they arise and pass away but not controlling or guiding this awareness in any way.

So with short daily practices, by sitting and giving attention to breath or sensations, noticing but not attaching to thoughts and emotions, one learns to manage, and not be carried away by, constant interruptions of mind, one learns to be with oneself in a way that is accepting, appreciative and encouraging. Cultivating this sense of tolerance and care for self through the formal practice of sitting meditation greatly enhances one's ability to manage the Three Streams of Attention and is a wonderful foundation for the care with which one greets the thinking of another. Through it a Thinking Environment practitioner can increase her capacity to remain focused on the object of attention, the Thinker, and curious of her experience without needing to change it.

Then the Thinking Partnership can become a form of meditation and the meditation a form of a partnership.

## **References**

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