

Experience of the Turning: From content to process

Imagine a temple: You are looking out the open door as sage smokes drifts on the breeze, cooling your tea...the emptied cloud has freshened the camphorous blue lavender, pungently calming the steps across sweet grass from heel to sole...wiggle your toes in the cool rain drenched mud...feel your heart beat and watch the birds hop and fly into the clouds...riding a horse along the beach, feeling one with the earth as the waves skipped sparkling beads of light shimmering; nothing but being in motion mattered.

In clinical practice and spiritual practice, clinicians and teachers often observe that in our culture there are many attachments to the content of thoughts which has been traced by meditation teachers, neuroscience researchers and clinicians as central to identification with form (including thoughts, emotions and concepts, which often lead to a focus away from experience, and a consequent belief in a permanent self. By way of these habits, much conditioning occurs that strengthens the attachment to their patterns of infrequently interrupted automaticity. Behold the story; the narrative of our lives that we may not only confuse the map for the road, but also that we may forget there is a difference between them.

In auto-pilot mode we are constantly task-oriented, an impermanent self trying to be permanent with time against us. We recall the past, but can't return to it, yet feel the loss from it; and we anticipate the future, worry about its outcomes or lack thereof, but cannot arrive there. Pitted between loss and pain and fear, we experience anxiety and depression. Depression comes from the weary battle with what was incomplete or lost from our history, and fear comes from anticipation of that which cannot be predicted. Finding our way out of the predicament is the auspice of ego, the constant churning of the unwelcomeness we narrate our lives with. There is no way out needed however, if we stop struggling with where we are to begin with. This would seem to be a simple practice to accomplish, but it is complicated by the entrenchment, repetition and assumption of the validity of content (forms).

In protection of this illusion, we spend much of our time operating in the sympathetic nervous system, engaging in fight or flight or preparing for the next round that we assume will soon come. This feeds into the negativity bias, the evolutionary dependence upon the detection of threat as a fundamental basis for constantly scanning the environment in order to prepare for a response. This is such a habit, that many find that they spend most of their waking lives in fight or flight mode. The conduct of daily life in this way has turned into a battle. The battle clouds our vision, and disrupts the healing process. Once a person is used to just doing (agendas, chore lists, activities organized and performed to keep busy, the production schemas and their attendant evaluations, critical thinking and judgment); entrenchment in content is inevitable and more and more narrative about more and more events seem very convincing and believable. This is occurring in and out of the experience of consciousness via the process of neuroception, an inherent risk and threat sensing process. We are able to mediate this system with practice. A very effective approach to this learning of adaptations and accommodations is the contemplative practice of Mindfulness. What makes practice exceptional is moving from a focus on thought, concept and form (top-down approach to rather a bottom up approach-being with experience. The breath becomes a working door into conscious awareness and the moment turns the door. In such

practices one pays particular attention in awareness to the out-breath. This engages the tone of the Vagus nerve. "...Physiologically, breathing 'gates' the influence of the myelinated Vagus on the heart. Functionally, when we inhale, the influence of the Vagus is attenuated and the heart rate increases. In contrast, when we exhale, the influence of the Vagus is increased and heart rate decreases. This simple mechanical change in breathing increases the calming impact and health benefits of the myelinated Vagus on our body....." 1

In contemplative work, we eventually come to place trust in our connections to our interoception via our viscera and blood vessel systems, well beyond the habits and conditionings set up by our thought content. The vagus nerve carries bi-directional signals between the brain stem and the internal organs..."This massive nerve is second only to the spinal cord in total number of neurons. Over 90% of these nerve fibers are afferent: that is, the vagus nerve's main function is to relay information from our guts upward to our brains..." 2

These neuronal networks have inclined us as social creatures, imbued with inclinations for empathy, care and altruism. These features have developed phylogenically, as part of what sustains us amidst obstacles, challenges and threats.... "The profound vulnerability of our big-brained offspring wired into us an instinct to care. It produced a vagus nerve, loaded up with oxytocin receptors, the provenance of feelings of devotion, sacrifice and trust. It yielded a rich set of signals-empathic sighs, oblique eyebrows, and soothing touch, which trigger vagus nerve response and oxytocin and opioid release in the recipient, giving rise to oceanic feelings of connection. It produced specific cells underneath the surface of the skin that fire in response to the slow, soothing touch of compassion." 3

The humanity of our given anatomy is thus deeply enhanced when we cultivate awareness, with the power of healing and the development of altruistic meanings that are a potential to each of us. When we practice with contemplative and mindful awareness, we begin to gain experience in the potential of the parasympathetic nervous system, which is a turn toward the affiliative and self soothing networks, so key to balance and resilient accommodation. The continuance of this practice as a labor of love can bring the gradual shift to systemic accommodation, cognitive adjustment, and neuroplasticity, wherein the working system can effect day to day and informal practice, a shift from content focus to process focus. Sustaining the practice is accomplished with not only strength of intention and purpose when difficult obstacles are encountered, but in working with the obstacles as if they were signals, reminding us to be with the present, start fresh and develop kindness, continuing to train in the observation that we are more than the content of thoughts and feelings. This is living closer to our actual life experience. This experience is lived not just during formal meditation practice, but from moment to moment.

" A key element of mindfulness is to remember to be fully present in our lives as we live them...It is important to frame mindfulness training within a compassionate orientation. When unaddressed issues begin to surface, such as feelings of shame, self-criticism, or self-loathing, compassion enables us to hold these feelings with kindness and understanding...Compassion training provides a context for working 'mindfully' with our tendencies to avoid or suppress our emotions. Compassion helps us heal the wounds to our soothing/affiliation system and offers a sense of connectedness." 4

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Patients with intense and severe anxiety and mood complaints are present with challenges to their recovery in the soothing/affiliation system due to low access and waning experience with their parasympathetic system. Many have, but have forgotten their fund of accessible, adaptive consciously experiential affiliative bonds with others. Such memories are somatic, internal and layered beneath the level of verbal, conceptual, not necessarily connected to forms of thought/emotion and are state dependent process. Energetically, these move from the viscera and present challenges to “talk therapy,” as they are difficult to describe during “triggering episodes.” This is the juncture between reading the process of experience (being), and (being-with), and the content focused methods of our day to day descriptions and narratives of that experience.

Essentially, the therapeutic bond is the process of the building off empathy, trustworthiness and compassion-seeds at times planted on initially arid ground.

When such patients are able to learn meditation, they are challenged to remain on a simple task that may not, except gradually, access their soothing system. From the outset it is useful for this task for them to learn the link between being mindful and being compassionate. Is this way mindfulness is linked to kindness.

Willingness to explore emotion and thoughts in kind awareness is a practice that can loosen the obstacles of self-criticism, and self-loathing by shifting the locus of identity (ego dystonia), that habit and conditioning have fossilized. Then consciousness of the dilemma is recognizable as having been only one of numerous potential accommodations learned during moments of overwhelm, rather than some sort of life sentence. Again, this serves as an example of moving from content to process, via awareness practices. Such practices incline the practitioner to reopen the soothing/affiliation system, helping to create experiences of connectedness, to assist in trouble shooting fears and resistances and to be aware that an outcome driven approach can lead to overwhelm when entranced in the content focus of a permanent self (selves) that habit and conditioning reinforce.

...”compassion can become undermined if we are too goal oriented and locked into the drive system, and too absorbed in the stark reality of suffering...We seek to cultivate compassion not to get rid of our anger, anxiety, or pleasurable desires...but to hold them in a compassionate space and to develop the wisdom to know how to work with them...our approach to mindfulness and compassion does not seek to get rid of anything; what it seeks to do is to understand and work with our minds as they actually are.
4(2)

The aware and gradual recognition that process is a larger; more accommodating and adaptive conduit increases our potential for dynamic learning and for a variety of responses to our many challenges and obstacles. In this way our self caring and self compassionate approach is a lifelong labor of love. This sort of love is an ability that can be cultivated. Like a bridge over a large body of water that becomes shrouded in fog, and that we know is still there, whether or not it is currently visible, the compassionate mindful practitioner is developing the object constancy of the process of navigating illusion; the illusion of permanence.

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The day will come when the illusion of permanence will be transcended ...to be in such a moment is free of the pain of the past, and free of the fear of outcomes. Be here and now and experience courage and kindness while you are able to ...

1 The Polyvagal Theory; Neurophysiological Foundations of emotions, attachments, communication, self-regulation, Stephen W. Porges, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2011

2 In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness, Peter A. Levine, Ph.D., North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, 2010

3 Born to Be Good; the Science of a Meaningful Life, Dacher Keltner, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 2009

4 Mindful Compassion; how the science of compassion can help you understand your emotions, live in the present, and connect deeply with others, Paul Gilbert, Ph.D., and Choden, New Harbinger Publications Inc., Oakland, 2014