

From Meta-Attention to Metta Intention

With the gentle and patient practice of awareness, a considerable barrier to our human capacity for insight, compassion and kindness, both to us, and gradually to others as well, becomes first translucent, then transparent, and eventually transmuted through exposure to the monitoring presence of inner-intimacy. The more frequently we are aware, the more we can witness how insight dissolves the containment of the intelligence which such barriers formerly clouded over.

Such barriers are the content-oriented dazzling attention grabbers that unwittingly lead us away from the moment, off on tangents and substantiating critical and analytical syllogisms and paradigms, which assist in protecting the reified identity that attaches consciousness to the belief in a permanence of self.

The revelation of an alongside and a transcendent process that empowers and supersedes the scope of the orientation to "content", allows the practitioner respite from the refractory periods* of our emotions. To the extent to which the practitioner (of mindfulness) has access to a process orientation, the skillful application allows the emotional capacity for the use of discernment, wisdom, calmness, adaptability, application of in-the-moment creative choice, as well as clarity of insight to be available for the common challenges of daily living. From that ordinary, yet useful beginning, more profound and even extraordinary capacities develop out of human potential. This is possible for just about anyone, inherent in our humanness.

The term that has been used to describe the process by which our consciousness can use awareness as a transcendent application is "meta-attention"+. This open space of awareness can be likened to the majesty of looking across a canyon, wherein the sense of self in the presence of space is expanded by the imagination, and the sense of time and confinement is diffuse. In Buddhist psychology, this is known as "emptiness". The translation from the far eastern language is apt since there may be an undiscovered upside to emptiness and loss; such that peace and freedom may indeed be found when we have connected with the fact of life's impermanence and that change makes clinging not only disappointing, but also futile. Acceptance of the latter can be liberating when practiced.

Such insight gradually known can eventually show the wisdom of softening criticism, and the drivenness to materialism that lead to unhappiness in their own misguided ways. So, in the practice of mindfulness, as the breath softens, the thoughts soften and a sense of acceptance replaces tension and with it, the gravity of resistance. Literally, figuratively and symbolically the walls and shields around the heart begin to become more permeable. Self-protections that emphasize the prisonlike aloneness of being a solo being in a harsh world have less of a grip upon the consciousness.

Hypnotically lulled into the habits and conditions the foundations of which take for granted that life will bring disorientation, change and uncertainty, without bringing knowledge about what to do with it can be tracked in awareness, as can a host of the varieties of negative, unpleasant emotions and thoughts. The clarity of heart that this provides can fill us with kindness, and the

potential for softening of judgment that is essential to forgiveness and Metta, a Pali language word for love, loving-kindness, and close mental union. This quality of love is altruistic and far reaching. It first radiates from the being that has dissolved the identity as a needfully harsh and critical creature of comfort, certainty and seeker of pleasure. Once kinder to ourselves, we are empowered to rest from an endless stream of efforts chasing after the establishment of a stability and permanence that continually is out of grasp. We may even cease "Looking for Love in all the wrong places." A veil has then been removed from our capacity for insight, creativity and peace. The illusion of a solid and permanent self is observed amidst the universal array of finite and alternately simultaneous representations, amidst the awareness of being aware.

Starting with the practitioner, first kindness begins with self by way of recognition of the vulnerability of the unprotected heart, known in Buddhist Practice as Bodhichitta. The holding of the heart in the healing space of mindfulness practice allows the genesis of the awareness to the impermanence of life. It then presents in the insight-awareness as a main integrating principle and kindness as its main vehicle for the understanding that can guide our actions.++ In the words of the poet, Naomi Shihab-Nye from her Poem, "Kindness", "... Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak it till your voice catches the tread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore..."*

In the practice of psychotherapy, Clinicians learn the art of reframing. Reframing is often the art of the paradoxical use of language to assist client or patients in accepting what has been for them conflictual to accept. In mindfulness meditation, practitioners learn that the universal paradoxes that keep one from accepting the conflict of a permanent illusory self versus loving being in the moment, although all will be eventually lost, can also be held in the light of awareness. This position of ultimate acceptance universally dissolves obstacles and allows suffering to lessen. Lessening one's own suffering is a bit like the well known instruction in commercial air travel. Once your oxygen mask is on, you may confidently assist others with theirs. The analogy goes further than the limitations of rescue functions in relationships. Placing intention on loving-kindness can be the basis upon which the relationships weather obstacles through consistency and integrity that can be maintained with kindness as their vehicle.

+Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge, B. Alan Wallace, (New York; Columbia Press, 2007)

++The Places That Scare You; A guide to fearlessness in difficult times, Pema Chodron, (Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston, 2001)

*Words under the Words: Selected Poems, Naomi Shihab Nye (Far Corner Books, Portland, Oregon, 1994)

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