

Mindfulness and Hakomi

If you can observe your own experience with a minimum of interference, and if you don't try to control what you experience, if you simply allow things to happen and you observe them, then you will be able to discover things about yourself that you did not know before. You can discover little pieces of the inner structures of your mind, the very things that make you who you are. (Ron Kurtz)

The Hakomi Method uses experiments in mindfulness as a way of assisting self-discovery... helping someone discover some of the habits and beliefs that organize experience, particularly those that cause unnecessary suffering.

All of experience is organized by habits. Mostly, our habits help us to function. Sometimes, however, our habits are automatic reactions to situations that are different than the ones which first organized these reactions. They are based on adaptations to past events and situations. The present situation may be almost completely different, and yet we continue to react as if the present situation is identical to the past.

Such reactions are, at best, limiting. At worst, they cause unnecessary suffering. The simplest analogy is if you see a stick and react in terror as if it were a snake... if you realize your mistake you can adjust your response. However, if you continue to assume the stick is a snake, you will be trapped within the fear of that maladaptive reaction.

In such a way, most of us have daily reactions that are based on wrong perceptions, assumptions, old attitudes, habits, and beliefs that cause us to predict and react inappropriately. Mostly, these ideas are outside of consciousness. We cannot be conscious of what we are unconscious of. There is consciousness... and there is what is not conscious.

Hakomi uses applied mindfulness to reveal some of these unconscious beliefs and habits, giving us the opportunity to choose to perceive and respond differently. We only need a few moments of what we call *mindfulness* for these discoveries. But what do we mean by *mindfulness*?

According to the buddhadharma, spirituality means relating with the working basis of one's existence, which is one's state of mind. The method for beginning to relate directly with mind is the practice of mindfulness. (Chögyam Trungpa)

Mindfulness is an ancient tradition in eastern spiritual practices... it is a form of meditation which is sometimes called "choiceless awareness".

Typically mindfulness is practised with eyes partly open. There is a tendency, when we close our eyes, to drift somewhere away from present moment wakefulness, to get sleepy, or to get lost in thoughts or images, in memory or imagination. This is not mindfulness. Mindfulness is being calmly wide awake.

Beneath the veil of self-identity that clouds clear vision rests a spaciousness of mind present in each of us. Mindful awareness makes that clarity more than a possibility, but a directly experienced reality.¹

Mindfulness is a way of relaxing and yet staying fully awake... a witness to whatever arises in consciousness. It is spacious, open, non-striving, non-searching, and non-attached. It is a quieting or lowering of the noise of the mind to allow for more awareness of whatever is occurring. Consciousness is like a window, open to the sky of the mind. In most of our waking moments, this window is seeing only a small view of the sky. In mindfulness, the window seems to get bigger, allowing for a larger view. Sometimes the view is obscured by mental noise, which is like pollution. My hotel room in Tokyo had a view of Mt Fuji which was only visible on a clear day. Most days, the air was not clear enough to see the mountain. Same mountain, same window, different view every day.

Mindfulness is both spacious and clear. It is a state of mind that allows for more consciousness of present moment experience, whatever it is.

Another analogy is that of the mind as like a body of water. What is visible on and below the surface is like consciousness. Usually, the choppy surface makes it difficult to see what's there. Taking a few moments to become calm and quiet allows more to come into consciousness.

In mindfulness, there is no attempt to make anything happen. There is nowhere to go. There is nothing to look for. Present moment experience has many aspects - bodily experience, sensory experience, thoughts, emotions; there are many realms of experience in every moment. Even our way of being "mindful" is organized by habits and is limited by habitual ways of paying attention. Usually our busy-ness, or distractedness, our efforting, or trance states obscure and limit our awareness of some aspects of present experience. Each moment contains riches beyond our imagining.

¹ The Mindful Brain, (Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being, by Daniel Siegel (2007)

In Hakomi, as a way of assisting someone in their journey of self-discovery, we use simple experiments offered to the person in “mindfulness” ... we invite the person to simply take a moment to quietly notice what, *if anything*, happens in reaction to the experiment. We also track the person for any visible signs of a reaction. If the person has a reaction, it might be a spontaneous thought, or emotion. It is very likely to involve a physical sensation or impulse. This, too, would be spontaneous and not intentional. The reactions that are significant are usually surprising.

Francisco Varela had this to say about mindfulness:

We are dealing with two reversals of the most habitual cognitive functioning, of which the first is the condition for the second; the second cannot happen if the first has not already taken place.

- *A turning of the direction of attention from the exterior to the interior.*
- *A change in the quality of attention, which passes from the looking-for to the letting-come.*

As a way of training students or clients, we might sometimes invite the person to quietly but specifically notice a physical reaction to our experiment, or to watch for a thought that pops up. This is useful as a way of helping them to develop more awareness of something not usually noticed. It is not a pure kind of mindfulness, which is truly “choiceless”. In mindfulness we don’t know what will happen or what category of experience will emerge. For example, sometimes what happens is a thought, or emotion... sometimes it is purely a physical reaction... perhaps something like a memory emerges. Any kind of reaction may contain information about the person’s models and beliefs, and more importantly, about what would be nourishing and new.

It is important to remember that if something like a memory emerges, it is not likely to be an accurate report of what actually happened in the past. It may, however, reveal an important belief or perceptual habit, and it can certainly point to the missing experience. Experience organized by habits is likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, a projection of our past onto the present, a limiting if not painful experience that does not allow for a certain kind of nourishment – one which doesn’t fit our model. This is the missing experience. The reaction someone has, in mindfulness, to a well-chosen experiment, can reveal the person’s *missing experience*.

Here’s an example:

Kim had a hard time trusting that anyone offering her a compliment was sincere. She had a habitual way of listening with her head turned a little aside, suggesting suspicion and doubt. In mindfulness, she experimented with listening to a nourishing statement... first with her habitual head position, and then turning her head to a more centered position. The difference was dramatic.

Kim's habitual attitude, her habit of listening "suspiciously" made whatever she heard seem insincere and unbelievable. Simply experimenting with moving her head into a more neutral position to listen allowed her to discover the missing experience of taking in the nourishment of a sincere compliment.

*In a way, all successful psychotherapy depends on the ability
to detach attention from habits and to describe them
from the point of view of a neutral observer.*

—Helen Palmer

This neutrality is an important ingredient of mindfulness. It is a state of mind where attention is open and receptive, spacious, and receptive. In addition, in Hakomi, the client's ability to report the experience, to describe what is witnessed, is essential if mindfulness is to become an effective path for the journey of psychotherapy as assisted self-discovery.

Posture and Mindfulness

There is a Zen saying: right posture, right breathing, right state of mind. (In Japanese: choshin, chosoku, choshin.) An integrated and aligned posture allows for the breathing to support the state of mind we call mindfulness.

Every posture of the body creates its own attitude and state of mind. When the posture is collapsed, the mind is more inclined to lean toward despair. When the posture is stiff, the mind is more inclined to be rigid. There is a simple posture, comfortable and erect, that supports the kind of neutral witnessing and describing we want to cultivate in mindfulness. Any other posture can create a filter that influences and limits experience.

In Hakomi, we look for the way someone's posture indicates habitual states of mind and models of self and reality. We can see, in someone's postural habits, something of their self-image and of what they expect and don't expect from others and from Life. Experimenting with postural habits can reveal to someone the different possibilities of experience in certain situations and in response to Hakomi experiments.

The first experiments in a Hakomi session might invite the person to study and explore postural habits and how they contribute to the kind of experiences they tend to have. Certainly, by the time the person has discovered a significant organizing belief and entertained the possibility of something new that would be nourishing... that is, a missing experience... awareness of the postural or physical components of the old pattern can support the ongoing integration of a new possibility.

Old habits don't go away. But we can create new habits. And we can learn to interrupt old habits when they come into conscious awareness and change an old automatic reaction into a new conscious response. This increasing capacity to choose a response in situations where we were previously locked into reaction becomes a liberating result of the practice of mindfulness and of Hakomi as a method of applied mindfulness.

Donna Martin

“You must use these methods with great skill. If you do, healing will happen. If things begin to go out of control, your tools are: containment, presence, calm, comforting, including touch when it is accepted, patience and sensitivity to the client’s unfolding needs. Do this and you will serve those who come for help in ways that are unique and not often available anywhere else. This service is a blessing that heals both practitioner and client and it will enrich your life beyond anything you can imagine.”

Ron Kurtz