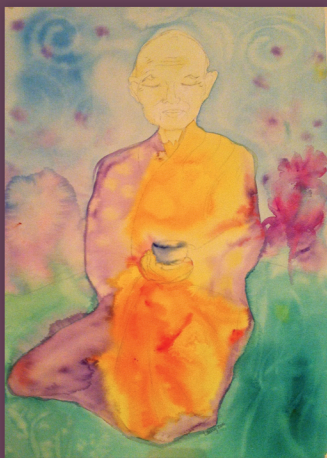


MINDFULNESS
and the
ARTS
THERAPIES

Theory and Practice



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Open Studio Process and its Relationship to Mindfulness

INTENTION AND MINDFULNESS

Since the 1980s mindfulness research has been conducted in numerous empirical studies particularly in the area of stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn *et al.* 1992), oncology (Massion *et al.* 1995; Saxe *et al.* 2001), and chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, and Bumei 1985; Kabat-Zinn, *et al.* 1986). Jon Kabat-Zinn (1982; Kabat-Zin, *et al.* 1992) among others, through the development of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and consequent research on MBSR as a complementary medicine, is responsible for making mindfulness meditation known in the mainstream. It is now available to vast numbers of people who might never come into contact with it through spiritual seeking. More recently research that examines the mechanisms of mindfulness by defining its constituent parts have moved away from attempts to prove efficacy and instead focused on the question of defining central constructs. Shapiro *et al.* (2006) have identified several characteristics of mindfulness that are constituent parts as well of the Open Studio Process. They identify three characteristic mechanisms of mindfulness meditation—intention, attention, and attitude. These authors note that intention is a critical part of mindfulness meditation that was culled from the practice to make it more neutral in Western medical arenas. There is always an implicit intention in Buddhist meditation practice, such as enlightenment or compassion for all beings. Without this larger intention, meditation can serve the function of self-regulation, as breathing mindfully will reduce anxiety and agitation, but the practice may never reveal its full potential for transcendence and transformation. Shapiro's study in 1992 (cited by Shapiro *et al.* 2006) found "as meditators continue to practice,

their intentions shift along a continuum from self-regulation to self-exploration, and finally to self-liberation” (p.376).

Similarly, our experience with the Open Studio Process has taught us that the intention is a co-evolving function along with our consciousness. Intention is a statement of *why* we are practicing, what we are aiming for. Over time we become more aware of our internal contradictions. Intention cannot manifest if it is in conflict with underlying unconscious beliefs. Therefore, one must follow the thread of intention that seems not to manifest to gain awareness and allow self-limiting beliefs to shift and change. This is accomplished through the review of one’s intention during the witness part of each session of the OSP as well as in the final review occurring at the end of each six-week session. We learned that intention is an exquisitely calibrated tool that requires clarity, discernment and especially mindfulness as we learn what it is we really seek. Each individual is responsible for their own deepening awareness. Neither the facilitator nor other participants point out perceived contradictions in one another’s witness writings. This is a critical difference between Open Studio Process and psychotherapy. Our role for each other is predicated on compassion and acceptance, trusting that change is an ever-present reality evolving at a pace and depth appropriate for each participant. If we feel reactive to another, that is information to invite into our own practice, gratefully accepted as a possible mirror of our own issues, reflecting a basic mindfulness tenet.

WITNESS AND MINDFULNESS

Witness, in the context of mindfulness, refers to paying attention to the contents of one’s own mind and one’s art. We pay attention as well to our relationship to others and their creative expressions letting go of the need to alter or explain that which we witness.

Witness writing is an element of the Open Studio Process in which participants are invited to simply notice and record their experience inclusively, without editing or explaining. It is not necessary for others to understand what we write. Often the words come in highly poetic forms, almost a sort of personal code that speaks to all present on a sub-cognitive level. Witness writing is the means by which we traverse the liminal space between the experience of merger with images and materials that occur in art-making and the re-emergence and integration of the experience into the flow of our lives. Art-making takes us into the place of all possibilities but eventually a particular image shows up; now we must get to know it, engage in dialogue, discern its meaning to us. Heart, head, and hand all converge in witness writing as the means of this engagement.

Witness consciousness, which is something larger than our individual energy, occurs when a group works together in the Open Studio Process. Our mutual sitting, being present with an attitude of non-judgment, paying attention without comment creates a spaciousness that allows the speaker to hear their own words as coming from a deep self without interference. We learn that each of us holds only a facet of the truth and we are all required for a larger knowing. *Witnessing* is a key element in creating a

collective space that is safe and allows multiple truths to unfold—being held without a push toward consistency or uniformity.

The practice of listening without speaking, of noticing our own internal responses to others but taking them as our own medicine (McNiff 1992) rather than sharing them, deepens our mindfulness. As we practice *compassionate disinterest* in witnessing what we hear, we are actually the manifestation of divine acceptance in that moment. We are the calm awareness of body, mind, and spirit that breathes in and breathes out, that point to which the traditional meditation practitioners return to over and over again in their practice. We pay attention to ourselves and to each other, to the space and to the images, without desire, without expectation. Shapiro *et al.* (2006) say:

In the context of mindfulness practice, paying attention involves observing the operations of one's moment-to-moment, internal and external experience. This is what Husserl refers to as a "return to things themselves," that is, suspending all the ways of interpreting experience and attending to experience itself, as it presents itself in the here and now. In this way, one learns to attend to the contents of consciousness, moment by moment. Attention has been suggested in the field of psychology as critical to the healing process. (p.376)

The notebook in which participants write becomes a record of a personal wisdom journey that can be returned to again and again. For some participants, such as the adolescents described in the following example, the collaging of the cover of a notebook can be substituted for drawing as the first task of the OSP six-week series and serves as both an introduction to the process and a way to set an intention for the entire course. Choosing magazine images can be a benign way to begin the art-making journey and a way of "making special" (Dissanayake 1992) and setting apart an ordinary object associated with school for a special experience and preparing it to hold much more than class notes.

Clinical Application

Open Studio Process with Adolescent Boys

Gunaratana (2011) makes the following suggestion:

We should consider the person who shows us our shortcomings as one who excavates a hidden treasure of which we were unaware, since it is by knowing the existence of our deficiencies that we can improve ourselves. (p.42)

After working for a number of years primarily in a community studio setting where participants were self-selecting adults eager for an experience of heightened self-awareness and delighted to be engaged in art-making, as well as teaching university students interested in art therapy and creativity, I was asked to provide a program for adolescents who had been expelled from our local public school. The students would receive academic credit for participation toward their graduation from high school. Would the OSP translate to this group under these circumstances? Would the students be willing to work within the structure of the OSP? Did teenagers care about

being mindful? A critical element of the efficacy of the Open Studio Process is that participation cannot be coerced and that the intention must be genuine.

I explained to the students that this class would be somewhat different from what they were used to. They would have complete freedom to create images that pleased them. They would learn only what they chose to learn. The only caveat was that they must write an intention that was true for them in the moment—not one written to please me or any other imagined authority. They must write an intention and later a witness but they need not read it aloud and if they did not, I would not read it either. They must refrain from making any comments aloud about their own images, as well as the images created by others. I would participate alongside them. The studio was a far more interesting space than the suite of drab offices the school had rented to house the alternative school program so the students were game to try it out.

Early intentions predictably included wording such as “I get through this so I can leave and get high,” or “I do what I have to do to get my credit.” Images included gang symbols, words from rap songs and crudely rendered male and female sex organs. I had no trouble maintaining my compassionate disinterest in what the boys produced since they did follow the simple rules.

We simply followed the process. I read my intention and witness writing aloud and made no comments on words or images created by the students in the studio. Some students read their witness; some did not. All art was kept in a flat file along with witness notebooks. It quickly became clear to them that I would indeed follow the rules as described and wasn’t shocked or disapproving of what was created. My interest was as a fellow artist. If asked, I provided tools and materials to accomplish what the student sought to express but did not suggest or interfere with the content. Interestingly, the dictionary became a well-used tool as students sought to find the right word and correct spelling for their witness writing, although correct spelling was not a requirement.

As part of the process, music was usually played on CDs in the studio as a way to add to the relaxed ambience. Since it was my studio, I was the arbiter of musical choice. My music of choice for the OSP is usually some variation of wordless world music with percussion that provides a light entrainment for most Western adults and interrupts the thinking mind and adds to the sense of relaxation. As the students felt more comfortable, they began to complain about the “lame” music I played. Typically, participants are encouraged to simply take any element of the experience, positive or negative, into their witness writing. This practice of witnessing allows for the experience of noticing and following one’s mind in a low-stakes form of discomfort, noticing what happens when one is simply mindful, without requiring or receiving immediate attention or relief. I modeled this behavior by including at times in my witness writing expressions of my frustration or displeasure; for example, with the clanging sound of the air conditioning unit that threatened to drown out the music at times.

However, with these teenagers, I saw an additional opportunity. I offered them the option of volunteering to choose the music each week, bringing music of their own to play during the art-making time. The following week Kevin brought several CDs and took charge of the music. The first one he played was a rap song full of misogynistic

images and language. As I listened to lyrics that I found vile, insulting, and disturbing, I stood before a large piece of watercolor paper affixed to the wall. I chose red and black paint and began to make marks on the page (Figure 3.1).

I noticed my thoughts: “What was I thinking? This is my studio, my sanctuary, how dare Kevin bring this awful stuff into my space? I don’t need to listen to this; I should march over and turn it off right now.” I felt anger; I felt betrayed; I felt stupid; what did I expect him to bring, Beethoven?

Still, I kept painting, watching my mind. How quickly I considered exerting my power, how easily I gave up my value of “equal artists” in the studio. The students painted as well. I painted how I felt—sharp forms, red and black overlapping in controlled rage. When the track finished, Kevin changed the CD. Now the lyrics of Tupac Shakur’s anthem to his mother, “Dear Mama,” poured forth. This beautiful song holds the complexity and impossible opposites of the artist’s life—Tupac’s acceptance of his reality and his mother’s, described as both a “crack fiend and a Black queen.” By the end of the first verse I was moved to tears and relieved that our painting papers were hung on the wall and my emotions weren’t completely visible.



Figure 3.1: Anger (tempera paint on paper 21" × 26")

We continued to paint. I was being given the opportunity to allow my judgments to arise and fall away as the Open Studio Process demands and was grateful that I had the paint and paper to hold my impulses and to give my feelings form. As the music

ended we sat down to our witness writing. I was ready to pour my experience into words. I did not hold back. I wrote how angry I was, how unsure of whether listening to the first song would forever destroy my willingness to have the teens in my studio; why should I put up with this degrading song? I wrote about how I was personally insulted and I was insulted on behalf of all women—didn't these boys have mothers and sisters? And I wrote of how moved I was by Tupac's lyrics, his ability to hold such contradictory feelings, his honest anger, his loss, his disappointment—and his understanding, and finally, his real and abiding love. I wrote about how that ability to hold extreme opposites was the thing I loved about art and that I hoped the boys would learn. I wrote about my gratitude to Kevin and my admiration of the risk he took to bring in this music. Then I read my words out loud to the boys. There was wide-eyed silence when I finished. Peter, another student, said, "You really felt Tupac."

I cannot imagine another format that would have allowed us, a white, middle-aged art therapist and a group of teenage boys, to have shared the space together with all the contradictions of our different realities held simultaneously in deep truthfulness. Painting absorbed and held my emotional distress sufficiently that I could remain present and mindful. I received enough pleasure in mixing and applying the paint to tolerate the discomfort of hearing the first song's lyrics without resorting to exerting my authority to end my discomfort. The colors, movement, and painting process enabled me to express the honest and raw emotion, while silently and mindfully observing my judgments, thoughts, and reactions. My deepest beliefs about the power of creative work were challenged and affirmed.

Of course, I will never know entirely what effect this encounter had on each boy present but the artwork that was made in the studio in subsequent weeks was engaged and often fully formed, honest, and expressive of the boys' reality, as challenging as it was. We had a show of the work at the end of the semester, each art piece accompanied by a selection of witness writings. Parents, teachers, and administrators attended and had their negative interpretation of these students challenged. My painting hung with theirs and we witnessed the complexity of our relationships together. My *intention*, to be fully present in my truth as an artist and a human being while being witness to the same in these boys, was fulfilled. Intention and witness created spaciousness and freedom for the complexity of our shared reality to show up. It also enabled the meagre stories told about teenagers who did not fit the accepted behavioral norms in our community to expand and deepen.

Conclusion

My work with the boys showed me that I could enlarge my tolerance for difference, challenge my capacity for compassion, and fully rely on the creative process to support me. I deeply experienced the truth of these words of Thich Naht Hanh (2004):

When you are angry, and you suffer, please go back and inspect very deeply the content, the nature of your perceptions. If you are capable of removing the wrong perception, peace and happiness will be restored in you, and you will be able to love the other person again. (p.145)

This method is accessible to anyone—it can be taught to clients as an adjunct to therapy or as an aftercare intervention; it can be used as a form of self-care and self-supervision for therapists; and it can serve as a form of mindful arts practice or inquiry into any subject matter for anyone.

These claims for the Open Studio Process (Allen 2001, 2005) may sound excessive unless we remember that the images that spontaneously emerge in engaged art-making form a bridge between inner and outer, between conscious and unconscious, and between self, others, and the world. When mediated with the additional tools of intention and witness, images arise that enlarge our mindful ability to guide the process and can be enlisted to manage the potential missteps of the therapist. The combination of an action-oriented approach using art and writing combined with close observation of self and others yields a unique mindfulness practice that has many applications.

Long-term meditators who experience the OSP have reported that they understand mindfulness in a much more profound way, having the actions of art and writing to render intention and witness visible as part of their practice. Many of us Westerners need an action-oriented approach to mindfulness that is more compatible with our culturally conditioned way of living. This approach to art and writing aids our balancing of head and heart, body, soul, and spirit by integrating awareness with an active practice that, through images, also leaves traces for us to contemplate as our ability to be mindful grows over time.

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