

Mindfulness of Self and Other

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Once upon a time, I heard a little saying or quip or something that goes something like this: self-knowledge is seldom good news. But, you know, sit down and meditate, and inevitably we'll discover those parts about ourselves which are there to make it difficult for us. The places of attachment, the places of preoccupation, the places of reactivity. Because all those places will stand out in highlight when we're trying to just be peaceful and calm and just be in the present moment. But that's what makes it difficult.

And so, for some people, it's a real surprise to get to know themselves. I've known people who didn't know how pervasive certain mental states were, how pervasive certain thoughts were, how pervasive certain attitudes were. I've had people come and start meditating and say, "I didn't know that much of my time I'm planning. I spend most of my time planning." Or, "I had no idea that there was a pervasive feeling of anxiety, that I'm often happy and doing wonderful things, but I didn't realize underneath it all is always something anxious and anxiety." And there's all kinds of things we discover about ourselves.

But one of the most important things about that process through mindfulness is that we can learn to see all these things with kindness. We can see it with compassion. We can see it kind of with an open-handed presence. We can see it in the same way, to ourselves, the same way you would sit with a friend who's going through a hard time.

Maybe they've discovered something difficult about themselves, and they wanted to talk to you and say, look, I'm having a challenge. So you sit on a park bench with them, and you realize all they really want is someone who's going to sit with them and hear them and let them talk about it. And you're just there, ready to accept them and love them just as they are. You don't have to fix them. In fact, fixing them, if they've asked you specifically, "Don't try to fix me. I just need to share this with someone." And you just hold it with kindness. You have space for them to be able to be this way.

So we learn in this meditation practice to do the same thing for ourselves, to listen, to be present, to acknowledge. And that is one of the great benefits of learning how to be mindful when the mindfulness itself has that kind of presence, mindfulness itself has that kind of generosity or quietedness. But the mindfulness itself is free of the reactivity, free of the judgments, free of the usual kind of—if we carry a lot of planning, then the mindfulness is not mindfully planning how to stop planning. Or if we're anxious, we're not anxiously trying to be anxiously mindful of a way to get rid of the anxiety.

The mindfulness itself is just very, very simple, like a good friend who sits on a park bench and just listens to you and is present for you and makes room for you to be yourself and to speak and find out what's going on. And so, as we do practice, we learn that capacity here. But we're also learning something else, which is what I wanted to talk about today, is that when we're with other people, we can now begin to learn how to have a healthy balance of attention for the person we're with and attention to ourselves.

And so, because we're learning to pay attention to ourselves and to hold ourselves in the news about how it's going on, our reactions, our responses, and our thoughts or the impact, the desires, we start tracking ourselves. We're mindful enough to track what's going on inside of us as we listen to other people. That's not meant to distract us from the other person, but it's meant to help us be a better listener, help us to be more present for someone.

Because if you're 100% present for someone else, it's all about the other person. You have to kind of give yourself to the other person, help the other person, serve the other person, take care of the other person. Then you can build up stress inside. You can have reactions and judgments and opinions. You can have reactivity that you don't even know is there that might actually make a mess of the situation.

You might suddenly get angry. You might snap at someone. You might end up with a headache. You might get completely, inappropriately, kind of give yourself away and not take care of yourself. But if you only pay attention to yourself, then you won't listen to the other person. You won't take them into account.

But the wonderful art in mindfulness is the ability to kind of give half your attention to yourself and half your attention to the person you're with. And that's the best balance because then, when it's that, then you can take care of yourself. You know what you're doing. You know how you're listening. You know when you're getting distracted. You know when you're getting reactive. So that doesn't have to get in the way.

But you're paying attention to the other person, so you're also tracking them. You're noticing

how they are. You're noticing what they need. You're noticing more deeply what they're saying and what's going on behind them. And somehow the magic of conversation, the magic of relationship, comes alive much better.

If you have kind of an equal amount of attention to both the person you're with and to yourself, with this kind of mindfulness that you're slowly learning, that has space, that's not reactive, that just can be wise about stuff, we can offer it better to others, we can offer it to ourselves, and in doing that something kind of begins to shape in the relationship, the kind of dynamics between the two people, that can be a wonderful third element in their relationship. There's not just about you. It's not just about me. But also there's something special about the relationship itself. The connection, the rapport, the care, the friendship that can develop very richly if we have this both there.

We don't have to give ourselves up, and we don't have to be all about me, myself, and mine. There's this wonderful other possibility. And what I find, what's really nice, is that when there's kind of 50-50 attention here, 50% to myself and 50% to the other person, that at some point me, myself, and mine, in a very healthy way, kind of disappear. It's not about me anymore, but it's not that I disappear in a way that I'm not in touch with myself.

I'm still tracking the emotions, the thoughts, the beliefs that are operating. I know what those are, but I'm not so strongly identified with them. I'm not coalescing around some idea I have to be this kind of person. And I kind of disappear in a wonderful way while I'm tracking all this in here because I can be responsible for it. I can take care of it, and I can know how to be with another person.

So that's kind of like what's possible as the mindfulness grows and develops over time, is we can bring that mindfulness into our interpersonal relationships. And that's one of the great kind of places where the practice kind of comes to fruition for us. So those are my thoughts for today. We have a few minutes. If this topic was interesting for some of you, if you have a question or a comment.

Yes, boy.

Hey, Gil, thank you so much for giving this talk. I think that's something that I need as of now. So one thing on top of that, I have questions about that to you. So one of my friends recently is experiencing some difficult situation at work. There's a lot of drama, this and that, at work. So when I talk with her, well, she automatically talks with me about all those dramas.

So when she talks with me about all those dramas, I can feel huge negative emotions, huge massive emotions, or negative emotions on her because she had to experience all those

things.

So you're listening, and she's pouring out negative emotions too?

Right. And I can feel in me there is an aversion to those negative emotions, that I don't want to hear those negative emotions. Yeah, so I wonder if being mindful of myself, half on me and half on her, like half on whoever I'm talking with, would that kind of negative emotion protect me from that negative emotion? Because, like, you know, we are having our own day and hear about this huge amount of negative emotion, and I will be influenced by those negative emotions. That's why I'm having that aversion to it. Yeah, so my question is, what if that mindfulness protects me from that negative emotion? How would that help me?

I can't guarantee that it will. Oh, just let me know how that... But it can make a huge difference because if you don't pay attention to yourself, the way you're challenged by those negative emotions, the way you tighten up, you get resistant, you get annoyed, and if the person continues and continues, then you're getting impatient. And then you're not really tracking yourself. You just feel all tense, and then at some point you kind of growl at them, you know, something, or suddenly you snap at them and say, like, stop, or you're crazy, or I don't know what you do. But there's something deeper inside, that there's a very quick reaction later that causes a lot of harm in the relationship.

But if you're tracking yourself and watching, yes, I'm annoyed. Yes, this is difficult. But I know it is. Let me breathe with it. Let me be careful now. Let me try to understand how to be here in a different way. Maybe there's a different way of understanding what's going on here. Yes, this is difficult.

And one option that is always good is if you can try to listen to your friend below the words. What does your friend really need? Or what's the real suffering your friend has? It might not be what they're saying. There might be a deeper thing that they don't even know themselves. Try to listen for their deeper suffering, how challenging it is for them.

And maybe you can have some compassion for the deeper suffering that's so strong that they're being so negative. Then when you hear the negative words, you notice, so annoyed. You're more permissive. You're more okay. This is just that they're having a hard time. And I think maybe what's helpful is I can be this big open space for them so that maybe if I don't react, if I just hold it all, maybe they'll relax.

Or if I hold it widely and just speak to the anxiety they have and say some simple words, "Oh, I can see you're trying to do well. I'm seeing that this is difficult for you. I can see that this is really a frightening time. I can see that you're doing your best you can," and try to speak to

that which is under the words. And that might make it easier for you not to get reactive. So does that give you some ideas?

Yeah, thank you.

If the question and the answers can be short.

I was just wondering, you know, when you said 50% attention to self and other, then I'm like, I have, like, my mind, like, you know, the mental chatter, and then there's, like, you know, the bodily sensation, and paying attention to myself would mean, like, first hearing my mental chatter and then converting it to a wiser voice, right? I mean, it's not just—

Yeah, I'd be a little bit slow to go automatically to a wiser voice. You want to first really see what's here. And part of the skill of mindfulness is to learn to be present for the range of things happening in the present. So certainly the chatter in your mind is important. Underneath and kind of part of those chatters are the emotions, the emotions which are feeding those thoughts.

And then part of that is what's happening in your body. Is your body stressed? Is it tight, constricted? And so you want to kind of—and there might be more than one emotion, there might be more than one bodily reaction. So you want to get a habit of really seeing that and being able to review it easily and take in the whole.

And then you might think about, is there another way? Is there another approach here? What do you need here? There's something, and you need compassion. You have to meet yourself with space and say, okay, this is hard.

And then if you have a really good friendship with the person you're with, that's a really good friend, then what's really great is to be able to say out loud what's happening. Say out loud what's happening. Say, "Well, you know, you're talking all about how difficult it is to buy a new car and how that's hard and crazy salespeople and this and that." And say, "You know, I've heard you now. I hear that it's difficult. But can I tell you a little bit that this is difficult for me too, to listen to this? And I want to care for you. But it's difficult for me because I have this old car, and I feel like maybe people are—I'm not really living up to peninsula standards."

And so then, "Oh, I didn't realize that it had that effect on you." And, "Oh, well, let's maybe change the subject or something." Or, you know, maybe both of us can cry first. I don't know. I mean, having a relationship where you can be honest about what's going on is a wonderful way to develop your mindfulness and find a way to work with yourself, but you have to be wise about the relationship. You might want to have an agreement ahead of time. Can I bring up how I am?

So now we're going to do the 15 minutes of mindful, mostly silent cleaning at the center.