



Presence: Meditating On The Gift That Keeps On Giving

Mitchell Milch, LCSW

Meditation could be most important “best practice” to employ each day to discipline yourself to be present in the moment of being. Presence is indispensable to the development of emotional intelligence and emotional intelligence correlates to successful relating. I’m defining emotional intelligence as a measure of one’s facility applying experiential learning to understanding and accurately predicting one’s influence on the outcome of new situations. I label meditation a “best practice” because it is a quality control measure in the same way a chef will codify cooking processes to ensure that the quality of dishes are consistently maintained. The use of meditation is the psychological equivalent of a ballet dancer rehearsing movements on the barre to stimulate muscle memory or a tennis player volleying before a match to hone the timing and rhythm of hand-eye coordination. It’s about finding an optimal level of emotional arousal conducive to the effective employment and coordination of our experiential and observing selves. On a neuro-physiological level this translates to the maximal recruitment and coordination of the left and right hemispheres of the brain.

Meditation anchors us in the present. It’s a mindful orientation to a bodily awareness. We drop anchor in the present moment by slowing and deepening our breathing. Our bodies are integral parts of our information storage and retrieval systems. We may liken our brains as coordinated and interactive multi-processor networks. Our stored intelligence is dispersed throughout our bodies. Psychotherapists often ask patients: “If your stomach could speak right now what tale might it tell?”

The wisdom of “reliable” intuition is distilled from thoughtful investigations into what we learn from trial and error and how we apply these lessons to more accurately predict and influence future outcomes. I place reliable in quotation marks because as a case in point, the unconscious intuitive false alarms of a traumatized brain are easily tripped by unreliable and invalid innocuous stimuli. The onset and impact of such stimuli may be as random and unpredictable as the fluctuations of the stock market. An intuitive “gut feel”

that can be relied on must be a response to events that cohere in some logical fashion. One can't rely on a "gut feel" if events unfold only according to the laws of probability. Reliable intuition is the direct consequence of processed experiences resulting in the ever expanding growth of anatomical structures supporting the increase of ever sophisticated decision trees. We stretch our knowledge by discriminating and making sense of sometimes minute anomalies in patterned behaviors. Let's call this the evolution of best tailored practices. Sometimes we operate within narrow time frames and must respond strictly by what feels like the right thing to do or say. There's no time to make cognitive sense of a potentially pivotal moment.

What slow, deep breathing does is to open us up psychologically speaking so as to become incubators of inventive wisdom. To anchor one's self in the moment is to set the conditions for being a sensitive tuning fork to a patient's multi-leveled communications. Some of us call this meditative state the empty brain- open heart consciousness of being. Others prefer such conventional Freudian terms as "being neutral without memory or desire." In the fields of arts and athletics this state of consciousness is labeled as "flow," or "being in the zone." Meditation is the multi-faceted operations of self-monitoring, disciplined attentive focus, and the modulation of states of emotional arousal. It is the optimal state of arousal that permits our brains to work in the most coordinated and effective manner. We know that the tragic flaw of the traumatized brain is that it is seldom if ever "cool under pressure." Equally important is how meditation offers us the awareness that we are resistant to anchoring ourselves in our bodies. We may struggle on any given day to contain and observe parts of our selves. Any awareness of anxious pendulum-like swings between the past and the future may indicate a need for some self-analysis before we return to the challenges of our day.

Practicing meditation can be as easy or difficult as your level of resistance to being with yourself. I liken it to starting an exercise program. You can convince yourself that to begin exercising you need the right outfit, the right gym, the right trainer, the right comfort looking in the mirror etc., to begin. The same could apply to meditation. It can be as simple as using deep breathing to anchor yourself in your body while you are washing dishes, or it can be as difficult as deciding that you can't start meditating until you research the most effective technique, pick a mantra, and figure out when and where you have 30 minutes each day to sit quietly.

Eckert Tolle, the world renowned spiritual teacher and author defines presence as the moment you are aware that your mind has been on an excursion elsewhere. The father of mainstream meditation in the west is probably Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard University. Benson in his book "Beyond The Relaxation Response" suggests that one can learn to be present any time and any where. It's a matter of attending to your sensory experiences as anchors. You can create conditions for flow or being in the zone while walking down the street. All that is required is slowing and deepening your breathing and paying attention to the sensory experiences of your foot falls. It only takes the creation of bounded space and one degree of separation between our experiential and observing selves to open us up to new possibilities for being with ourselves, our loved ones and our patients.

Benson doesn't know he is preaching to the analytic choir when he touts the indispensability of breaking free of our habitual non-learning ways of thinking to access the creative transformative mind. There may have only been one Mozart but there's a little bit of Mozart in each of us to tap into if we design the conditions for our artistry. Enjoy!