

What Was Missing in Mindfulness

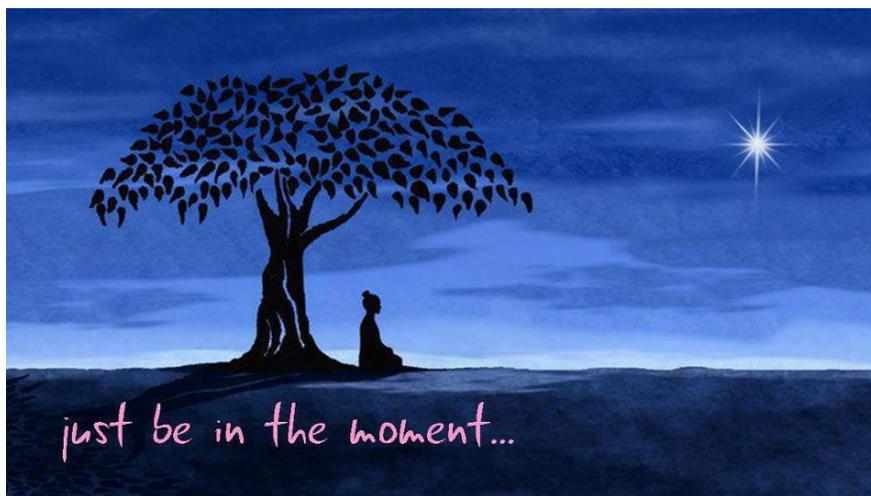
By Mark G. Lersch

www.marklersch.com

www.corequestpotential.com

smilingdeeply@gmail.com

To vividly hear the beautiful song of a bird, to really taste a delicious meal, to be very present with a person you love and feel the emotions of it warming your heart; to experience your life-energy pulsing through your body as



you walk the dog, this is what it means to be present and alive. Being present in this way is also called "mindfulness" in the Buddhist tradition. Although mindfulness has been taught and practiced in Buddhism for over two thousand years it now has become a popular tool to combat depression, reduce chronic pain, alleviate stress and improve life in general in western culture. Here in the U.S. we know an idea has become popular because it arrives on the cover of Time Magazine, as indeed mindfulness now has (see Time Magazine: The Mindful Revolution, Feb. 3, 2014).

The practice of mindfulness has been especially important on my spiritual journey precisely because, in order to cope with painful emotions, I have lived so much of my life doing exactly the opposite, namely "checking out", dissociating and disconnecting from the body. At an early age, like so many highly sensitive people, I learned that Earth was not always a pleasant place and that I could easily fix that problem by simply "going away" mentally. Dissociation worked so well for me that I probably spent more time out in the ethers than I did in my own body. It gave me a sense of power and control to be untouched by the craziness of this planet and to be able to withdraw into my own world. Although protecting me from the pain of life, my dissociation also numbed me from the joy and love as well.

When I hit my late 20's I began to have a vague sense that something was seriously missing but didn't really know what the problem was. Because I was so disconnected and disembodied I also found myself making a lot of foolish decisions. My Wounded Self was clearly in charge, although I had no idea what that even meant at that time. I wound up hurting not only myself but also those around me.

Thus I began my spiritual search in earnest and shortly thereafter found Buddhism and its various practices of mindfulness. Because my wife also felt drawn to this tradition, we became deeply absorbed in Buddhism for over a decade. We even made a couple of visits to the "mindfulness mothership" herself, Thich Nhat Hanh's Zen monastery in France. We walked in mindfulness, ate

in mindfulness and cleaned toilets in mindfulness. We stopped and marveled at bumble bees laden with pollen fumbling through deep flowers. We connected with the sensation of breath whenever the phone rang. We really slowed down and enjoyed the simple pleasures of life. It was wonderful!

Despite the great things we were learning and experiencing from our practice of mindfulness, there was still something missing. I would hit a wall that caused me to dissociate even while meditating in the most peaceful of settings. When I described my dissociation to my Zen teachers they would give a very Zen answer: "Just keep sitting". For this reason I found myself drifting away from Buddhism and drawn to practices that allowed me to feel more embodied, like the martial art of Aikido. However it wasn't until my encounter with Inner Bonding that I finally did find the missing puzzle piece.

I discovered that what was missing for me in mindfulness was a personal spiritual connection; one which allowed me to feel safe enough to be present with the uncomfortable emotions from childhood that I kept dissociating from. Without that personal connection to Spirit, I was unable to be fully present with the feelings I had as a child because it was too overwhelming to face them alone.

During Zen meditation, what I often found myself doing was trying to surrender into the pain and forcing myself to try to be present with difficult feelings so that I could make them go away. This didn't really resolve anything because I was in the intention to control: sitting for hours in meditation retreats trying to fix myself, pull myself up by my bootstraps and surrender to the impersonal aspect of the Divine (called Vast Emptiness in Zen).

Reflecting back now, it actually makes perfect sense that my old coping mechanism, dissociation, kicked in automatically to faithfully protect me from the pain. Without a personal connection to Spirit, I either just sat there alone, suffering in it without resolution or at the other extreme, disconnected from my body floating away into a dissociative dream state.

For some people, when they get really present and mindful they actually do open their hearts and at some level allow Spirit to come in and alleviate suffering. However, I am one of those people for whom this kind of mindful experience was more like an accident. I had no idea how it happened! But eventually, by cultivating a personal connection with Spirit which allows me to open to the warm, loving, relational aspect of the Divine, I found that I can turn toward the blocks and invite Spirit to clear them, rather than suffering indefinitely.

What allows me to be more mindfully present with difficult feelings is having that personal connection with Spirit so that I am held lovingly in the face of those feelings, and so that Spirit can clear out the cause of the pain. My sense of it is that our job is to face our pain and those difficult blocks, to acknowledge and feel them, but then to invite Spirit in to do the work of clearing them out. It is Spirit that actually clears the blocks through the power of Love. This is Inner Bonding.

I find that many people believe they not only have to feel their pain, but that it is somehow also their responsibility to clear it out. When our Wounded Selves attempt to do what is the job of Spirit to do, we are just in the intention to control all over again.

Equipped with a personal connection with Spirit and the practice of Inner Bonding I now find that it is much easier to be mindful. I am not afraid to be embodied or to feel my emotions, and thus, I can now experience the deep joy of being alive in the here and now. I am still not always as present as I would like to be because old survival habits can take a while to change. However, finding a personal connection with Spirit and realizing that I can't dissolve the blocks without help from Spirit has really been pivotal in my own journey.

As I finish writing this, I hear the soft rain falling on our roof, I feel the breath of Spirit moving my chest and I open to the warm gratitude filling my heart. Thank you Buddhism! Thank you Inner Bonding! Thank you Spirit!

Mark is a certified Inner Bonding facilitator and spiritual psychotherapist in private practice in Longmont, Colorado. He can be reached at 970-670-0557 and via email: smilingdeeply@gmail.com. His website: www.marklersch.com