

Entering the Stream: A Journey through Mindfulness Based Art Therapy

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Many abrupt or painful changes happen to us in life. We experience a sense of disconnection at these times. Often pain is what grabs our attention and holds it. Our old way of being doesn't fit anymore. A new way has not yet emerged. These moments of disconnection or of uncertainty contain possibility. They contain an elusive and yet tangible open awareness of the unknown. They hold possibilities of heightened awareness, a flash of insight, compassion or joy at the same time as they hold pain and suffering. This open state of mind may be cultivated through mindfulness practice. Learning to be fully in the present moment, with genuine curiosity and warmth, allows us to attend to this open quality of experience, and to notice the possibilities inherent within uncertainty.

Perhaps we have an injury through an accident, and find ourselves confronted with the pain and suffering of limitations in our abilities, our strengths, or our independence. These limitations impact ideas about who we are and about our capabilities. Abruptly our solid reference points, such as our self-concepts, are challenged. I'm a fast runner becomes I can't run. I'm self-sufficient becomes I can't serve myself dinner. I'm smart morphs into I can't think clearly. I'm a provider changes to I can't work. I'm a violinist transforms to I can't play any more. Similarly, emotional trauma challenges our sense of who we are. For example a divorce calls into question our ability to love or our sense of being a good parent. It affects our ability to provide for our family. Perhaps it alienates us from our church.

When pain grabs our attention and keeps it, mindfulness is lost. Our focus and open awareness become separated. The openness of being fully present recedes into the background of awareness. Pain focuses our attention, and that focused attention is very quickly amplified by feelings and thoughts about the pain. The openness of not knowing, or not having an answer, of curiosity, becomes invisible. Pain becomes solid. As we all know, when our story about pain becomes elaborated, the situation takes on new levels of difficulty, becoming more conflicted or confusing. We now have an emotional problem added to the physical event. The problem obscures the mind's ability to sense anything other than the problem itself.

Approaching this from a Mindfulness Based Art Therapy point of view, let's consider a hypothetical but realistic example, based on several situations involving car accidents which I have amalgamated and from which I have eliminated any identifying elements. Sharone's situation illustrates how a range of typical therapeutic issues might be addressed. Sharone has been in four car accidents over a period of seven years. Her partner died one year before the first accident occurred. After the most recent one she seeks therapy. She is experiencing fear while driving, particularly when she approaches an intersection, anxiety when she is alone at home at night, and strong, chronic pain in her neck and shoulders, her lower back and her hip. She drives with a back support, sits on an ergonomic chair at work and at home, takes daily pain medication, goes to yoga classes, and eats a healthy diet. She says she wants to deal with her fear of driving.

In the latest accident a car struck her from behind, pushing her forward into an intersection as the light changed to green. She definitely had whiplash, her leg was bruised and strained, and her hip pain became severe. She thought maybe the car coming up behind her didn't have time to slow down because she hadn't started up fast enough when the light changed to green. I wondered to myself why was she blaming herself. So I asked about other accidents.

The first accident happened when a car ran a red light in front her as she was crossing an intersection. She has had neck and shoulder pain since then. Even though she was not at fault, she felt responsible and guilty for the serious injuries suffered by others. Her next two accidents were minor, but she thought they might have exacerbated her neck and shoulder pain. She developed lower back pain following the third accident. Although, in the third accident no one was seriously hurt, she worried about possible after-effects that others involved in the accident might be suffering without her knowledge. Now she also wonders why she keeps having accidents. She wonders if she is losing her judgment, or if her reaction times are off. She has elaborated these thoughts into being a bad, and dangerous person who could hurt others.

The initial problem of pain from the first accident is now layered with many associative emotions and thoughts. One core belief she now has is that she is responsible for the accidents even though she was well within the law, and had been driving appropriately. A second core belief is that she is incompetent and possibly dangerous. Enveloped in her narrative, she ignores her physical symptoms as best she can. Her body continues to tighten and hold and her physical pain continues. She needs to drive, but no longer feels competent or confident as a driver. She is afraid it will happen again, and that she will die. She has had a panic attack while crossing an intersection and has decided to come to therapy.

In the first MBAT session, having heard her story, we contracted to look at the whole of her experience using a progressive mindfulness art process. She agreed to try a daily mindfulness practice at home, sitting for a minimum of ten minutes each morning and doing mindfulness contemplation before sleeping each night. In session we would look at her conflicted emotions, her body responses and core beliefs through the art.

Trying to Catch the Wind.

As Sharone spoke I kept hearing snatches of song in the back of my mind. I would refocus my attention to her, and the lyric would intrude again.

“In the chilly hours and minutes of uncertainty,
I want to be in the warm heart of your loving mind.
To feel you all around me
And to take your hand along the sand,
Ah, but I may as well try and catch the wind.”¹

And I wondered about her anxiety at being alone at night.

Most of us want to meet uncertainty with connection. We want to feel contact with life. We want to be happy, and perhaps we want pain to go away. Our pain and the fear of pain distract us from the possibility of relating and seem to block the flow of pleasure in our lives. We might remember reaching for the butterfly beyond our fingertips, or the soft caress of the moist air on

¹ [Donovan, Catch the Wind, 1964](#)

our cheeks, or the thrill of running, but the pleasure of the memory is fleeting and the memory of pain dominates. Our fingers are numb when we touch another and our hearts distracted. Mindfulness Based Art Therapy offers a framework and a process for creatively entering the flow or stream of awareness. The process combines mindfulness practices and teachings, Chi Kung and Dharma Art. The curriculum is structured to be adaptable to different settings. It may be used at home, as a process of self-guided reflection requiring a minimum of art materials, or explored in a full studio setting. The process was developed in a structured counseling context. It may be adapted for individual or group settings. The support of the therapeutic alliance in counseling allows the client/artist to connect fully and deeply to emotional issues, to use the reflective relationship dynamic to look directly and deeply at issues, form new perspectives, and generate fresh awareness and insight. The art offers a third, non-verbal, reflection, or point of view.

Our life force, or chi, is formless and insubstantial like air. (Master Lam Kamchuen²) Like the wind that Donovan describes, we can't catch and hold it. We can, however, cultivate the ability to connect to our life force. Chogyam Trungpa³ describes this as "tuning in simply and directly to your process of life", while Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi⁴ talks about learning to cultivate the optimum experience, or be in the flow. We can choose to deepen and strengthen our connection to our life force. We can consciously step into the stream of our experience and live our life from the center of the stream. Sakyong Mipham⁵ describes it as learning to ride our life force energy through both the painful and the pleasurable moments. We can learn to increase our ability to be present every day, arouse our life energy, and accomplish what we want to do.

Each of these teachers present mindfulness practices that help us get to know our personal pain and to find a way of working with it. This involves becoming friends with our life circumstances, engaging the pain, and appreciating our present experience. As we learn to relate with our suffering in our personal world, we become more able to face uncertainty. For Sharone it means creating a mindfulness practice container that will allow her to relate directly to her anxieties and her emotional struggle. As she relaxes her struggle, and begins to familiarize herself with her fears, her physical well being is likely to improve. (Seigel, Ron⁶) She can learn to ride the wind of her own energies, and to rest in the still depths of her being.

The mindfulness based art curriculum has three stages. It teaches mindfulness of body through the senses, gesture, posture, breath, and movement. The client-artist learns to consciously focus, and maintain awareness within each of these. The ability to choose one's focus supports the experience of inner calm. This attunement to self and other, and the world, is the first stage, called Connecting, within MBAT. In stage two, Capacity Building, the client/artist progressively unmask herself to herself through the images arising in the art. The open moment becomes a mirror, reflecting accurately and precisely the client's world. Awareness expands and new

² [Kamchuen, Master Lam, pg 8, Master Lam's Walking Chi Kung, Sterling Publishing, New York, New York](#)

³ [Chogyam Trungpa, pg 34, The Heart Of The Buddha, Shambhala Publications, 1991](#)

⁴ [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, pg 3, Flow, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, Harper and Row, New York, New York, 2008](#)

⁵ [Sakyong Mipham, Ruling Your World, Tree Rivers Press, New York, 2005](#)

⁶ [Seigel, Ronald, Germer, Christopher, Fulton, Paul: Mindfulness and Psychotherapy, Guilford Press, NY 2005 p. 189](#)

reflections arise. Working with the principles of mask and mirror, the client develops discernment, precision, kindness, and decision-making skills. Through synchronizing body and mind, compassion and the confidence to trust herself, and her actions grow.

It has been my experience that many of my clients have learned to use MBAT as a day-to-day practice. It keeps their creative juices flowing and engaged. Their view of their issues, or pain and or suffering, shifts from a moving wide-angle lens to a close-up shot and widens out again into a rich and nurturing vision that reflects the natural flow of their expressive mind. They have practices that keep their daily lives energized, awake, and happy. They feel confident to deal with whatever occurs.

Sharone learned to focus her attention into her breath and to consciously open her senses through doing the art. Non-judgment and gentleness became the key to re-learning how to be in the flow of her life force in practical situations. She could open to the touch of her dog again, or appreciate the feel of silk on her skin. Her pain levels decreased as her anxiety began to decrease. When she identified the source of her negative core beliefs, she was able to relax their grip on her, and learn to consciously shift her focus, and her awareness. Sharone's grief about her partner's death emerged through the art in stage two. She had grieved, and then, needing to work, had tried to pull herself together, and go on. The empty bed at night was still haunting her. Once she faced her grief, her anxiety about being alone at night decreased. As Sharone re-connected to her life through her practices, her inner sense of aloneness was highlighted. The mutuality she had shared with her partner had been disrupted by his untimely death. She had not re-established her links with others, and had been unable to face the loss.

After painting a picture of herself alone at home at night, she realized she was still in grief. She was able to allow herself the space to mourn. She also realized she was thinking about him when the first accident occurred. Looking directly, she felt that his death might have been prevented, if she had forcefully insisted on speaking with the doctor and getting a second opinion.

Fundamentally she believed she had let him down.

“Chi is the true face of the inner strength of all things. When you look at a great old tree it radiates immeasurable strength and power. The exterior is neither threatening nor dangerous yet somehow you are intimidated and dwarfed by it's presence.”⁷

The strength of her grief was overwhelming and intimidating, reflecting the depth of her love and passion. In her mindfulness art practice, and her loving kindness contemplations at night, she developed empathy towards herself and respect for her heart. Her view of herself had changed. She could face her loneliness. In her art she experienced the strength and power of her love. As her tears flowed, and her anger deepened into rage, and then emptiness, she felt her neck let go and her shoulders open. Her head came up, and her eyes gazed directly at me. She realized she was using less pain medication. She began to move with more grace, less constriction, less pain. When her love came directly into her art, her heart broke wide open, releasing her lower back and hips. Again her pain decreased. She was learning to stay in the flow. She entered the third stage of MBAT called Manifesting Sanity. Today, her pain levels still fluctuate, depending on her stress levels, and the consistency of her practice. Her anxiety and her fear of driving are gone.

⁷ Kamchuen, Master Lam, pg 8, Master Lam's Walking Chi Kung, Sterling Publishing, New York, 2006

Occasionally, when she approaches an intersection she begins to tense. She takes that tensing as a stepping-stone to her love for her partner and she smiles. The tension releases. Her love for him is an optimal experience that continues to deepen over time. It enters her into the flow. It gives her immediate access to her body-mind awareness, her ability to self-regulate arousal states, and her joy in being alive. She can evoke her own stability, and choose to express her sanity. She can move through fear to fearlessness. In stage three she is integrating her learning and practice in her daily life. Sharone continues to practice Chi Kung, and has begun to collage with textiles, exercising her sense of touch, her love of color, and enjoying the freedom to express anything she feels without labeling it. She notices others who are grieving. She listens to their story and offers whatever comfort she can. Recognizing the need for care and community, she is grateful for opportunities to extend her generosity and compassion. Her love for her partner deepened into a creative and spiritual expression that has broadened into all her relationships.

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[True Point: Within each of us there is a deep source of integrity, a point of personal truth that is our lodestone. It illumines the path of natural intelligence, innate wisdom, confidence and freedom.](#)