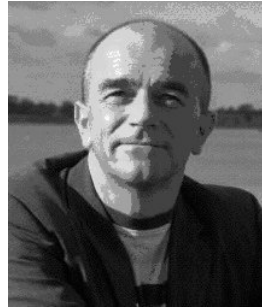


Mindfulness and acceptance approaches to psychotherapy

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Preamble May, 2007

I am responding to an invitation to write about the 'Mindfulness and Acceptance approaches to Psychotherapy' in advance of the summer conference. I can use the opportunity to evoke some intentions and notions of structure, strategy etc in preparation for the workshop I will be offering with this title.

Inevitably it depends upon the mix of who turns up; what people want, expect ...how much they think they know or think they don't know about whatever might be meant by Mindfulness and Acceptance approaches to psychotherapy.

As well as noticing how much the word mindfulness is used in therapy nowadays – particularly in CBT circles - I notice how it's used frequently in a more general way in the news media. One of the pre-intentions I have is to convey the notion that the so called third wave of CBT development can be framed as another developmental step in the *humanising* of the behaviourist tradition.

Step 1: therapist changes unhelpful behavioural routines,

Step 2: therapist and client collaborate to see how client's unhelpful thoughts can be challenged in order to change unhelpful behavioural routines,

Step 3: a psycho-educational collaboration through radically intimate experiential exercises which urge, as their agenda - at the deepest level of intrapersonal empathic contact – an accepting, non-judgemental stance to whatever aspects of experience are congruently available to witness, moment by moment.

Phew – better take a 3 minute breather here!

Why would I want to frame it like that? ...well it's helpful ... I have a passion for integration yet my irritation with the scientismic hegemony of CBT, it's routines, directiveness, symptom-fixing had been getting in the way. Up until now ...

Now this is taking up too much attention (as an instrumental - using the term as in Rowan & Jacobs, 2002 - approach can often do).

From a personal historical point of view, my interest in meditation and psychopractice started out around the same time in the early 80's via Vipassana meditation and Co-Counselling. I puzzled over the apparent contradictions of these traditions ...particularly in relation to 'feeling' ...the 'how to be with' vs the 'what to do with'. My learning and experiences seem to *have to proceed separately* but in *parallel*. Later, over a decade of co-facilitating 'Passages camps' (1990-2001) – an annual series of summer camps, long weekends and ten day intentional community gatherings exploring various existential themes through a mix of experiential groups and insight meditation, (along with dance, ritual & ceremony, music, nature & play) – provided the beginnings of an integration.

The research I did between 1996-98, however, began to explore the possibilities for an 'in-session' integration. In a co-operative inquiry entitled 'Towards an integration of counselling, clienting and meditation' a research team comprising peer colleagues who also were both co-counsellors and committed meditation practitioners, presented their 'results' in the form of a D.I.Y pamphlet 'The Co-Med contract' which outlines a method and some guidelines for practice

for dyad work. All that work is still available on the web including a downloadable Co-Med contract pamphlet. <http://www.martinwilks.plus.com/Research/DissertationCover.htm>

In the literature review required by my dissertation I came across books from both psychodynamic and humanistic traditions:

'Thoughts without a Thinker', Mark Epstein, and 'Zen Therapy', David Brazier. were illustrative examples. No obvious book-titles at that time from the Cognitive tradition but book-size collections of research papers (Shapiro, D. et al) indicate to me now, with hindsight, the building momentum of this third-wave revolution.

Back to planning: the workshop will have some experiential component – if not least to balance all this mentating. Mentating is taking up too much attention (as mentating can often do).

It has been my privilege, to run a variety of long-standing daily mindfulness practice groups: Glastonbury festival, Dance camp east, HMP Brixton and more recently running formal MBCT groups. Quintessential moments of stillness, fascinating group debriefs, some breathtaking moments oozing with the pregnancy, the imminence of the next ... the buzz of summer insects, the terror of a panic attack in the midst of a tree climbing meditation, the ubiquitous jangle of the jailer's keys, the pumping, undulating aural ambience of 5 rock-stages, thunder, lightning and the staccato drumbeat of rain on canvas ...

And however it will be at the AHPB event. I'll also have the opportunity to facilitate the morning meditation sessions. For me as a musician, summer

gatherings like this often offer the chance to be at the heart of a party. Having the morning meditation responsibility helps me personally to keep me balanced (relatively speaking) ... a kind of mindful partying.

Back to the colloquial use of mindfulness ...and its opposite: mindlessness. Perhaps most often used in conjunction with the concepts of violence, aggression, destruction. Prison has been a most gratifying environment from which to introduce mindfulness. Many will remember where they were when they first witnessed the destruction of the twin towers. I was in the cell of a long term lifer who'd just witnessed the first plane crash on his TV. Seeing me walk by on the landing he invited me in to watch with him. Convicted of murder - a pimp in his early twenties who'd killed one of his 'girls' during 'punishment' - he'd had years of violently bucking and resisting 'the system' - much of it in solitary confinement 'down the block'. Eventually he'd come across Buddhism and now, towards the end of sentence, reintegrated into the prison system and an earnest, committed meditator, he sat and we watched silently together. Eventually I indicated to him I'd better go get on with things - surely the action's over now, I couldn't watch any more repeats and the analysis had started in earnest. He switched off the TV, we shared a significant look and then wordlessly settled into seating posture for meditation. After some time we came out of stillness and he shared his opinion 'things will never be quite the same again'. I agreed as I left.

The poignancy, context & juxtaposition of peace, violence, change, stillness and equanimity will be with me for ever!

But I digress ... and I've not done much planning.

Postamble (August/September 2007)

Reflecting back on the AHPB 2007 conference and, specifically upon my offerings to the gathering - well it feels handy to have a chance to clarify some of the things I was trying to put over in my presentation. As well as a workshop I also had the opportunity to facilitate two morning mindfulness meditations slots. They went well; I usually do feel inspired and at ease when sitting in stillness in a circle of people. Out of that space I can often come up with periodic, poetical reminders, utterances to help bring people back to the present and to whatever chosen object for anchor we are on: sounds, breath, body sensations or 'contents of mind' (The four foundations of mindfulness.) During one morning sitting a flock of calling wild geese flew overhead. I was reminded, briefly (before returning to the sound of the present!) of a poem 'Wild Geese' by Mary Oliver. She, along with Rumi, are oft quoted on 8 week mindfulness courses as masters of a metaphorical way of pointing towards being in and accepting the present moment. And, at the end of a meditation period, I revel in the opportunities which abound in a group debrief - a collective pooling of insight - for clarifying and deepening understanding of mindfulness meditation practice and its place in the ongoing cultivation of a mindful stance to daily life.

As for the presentation - less familiar ground and, potentially, a much broader agenda! In planning and preparing resources beforehand, I decided that I'd need to be informed by the interests, experience and perspectives of workshop attendees before finally

deciding how to pitch the workshop (see preamble). As it turned out, I was both gratified, and somewhat overwhelmed by the number (50+) who were interested in the topic. (Forget handouts, you've only got 30 copies!) 'Show of hands' answers to various initial questions (intended to help me identify some kind of group 'centre of gravity') did not supply me with any obvious agenda pruning strategies – there were simply a broad range of people with various perspectives and experiences. So I threw myself at the workshop in wordy enthusiasm, interspersed with brief periods of mindfulness practice exercises. From my presenter's perspective, it was a bit of a jumble – somewhat overambitious. So, I'm grateful to have the opportunity in this article, hopefully, to clarify.

The 'Mindfulness and Acceptance Approach' is currently being described as a 3rd wave of development in the cognitive/behavioural tradition. I felt it was important at the outset to acknowledge other traditions: the Buddhist tradition – to be obvious, and also the humanistic tradition; that burgeoning of interest in eastern psychology out of which grew the 'human potential movement'. We began to list therapies which incorporated 'Mindfulness': psychosynthesis, Core process psychotherapy, Gestalt ('attention, in and of itself, is curative' Perls).... Before long it was hard to think of what humanistically orientated therapy DID NOT incorporate mindfulness.

To clarify, the new third wave mindfulness and acceptance approaches share in common a psycho-educational element – techniques and exercises offered to, and practiced with, the client as scaffolding in the

building up of a more mindful and accepting way of being.

It was time to list the main exemplars:

The eight week mindfulness based group courses:

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) relapse prevention in depression

Mindfulness Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP)

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)

Dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) – usually requiring a team effort & therefore often delivered in a residential setting.

Steven Bachelor, in 'Awakening of the West' offers a scholarly description of how in successive waves of development, the impulse of the Buddhist way of life – upon meeting new cultures meshed and merged with the wisdom traditions of the host culture producing after a period of gestation new enhanced forms of practice. Seminal, historical characters are remembered as key translators between the merging traditions (Marpa the translator, Bhodidharma). I proposed John Kabat-Zinn as such a translator who, together with the work of Mark Williams and John Teasdale in England has rendered the efficacy of contemplative insight (authenticated by an unbroken 2500 year long lineage) into a language which can be read and understood by those steeped in the rigorous demands of the evidence based empiricism of our predominant cultural paradigm.

I shared a favourite quote

"Consciousness is the medium which carries the messages which compose experience. Psychotherapies are concerned with these messages and their meanings; meditation instead directs itself to the nature of the medium, consciousness. These two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive; rather, they are complementary. A therapy of the future may integrate techniques from both approaches, possibly producing a change in the whole person more thoroughgoing and more potent than either in isolation"
(Goleman, 1988)

I believe that the mindfulness and acceptance approaches represent the beginning of that new therapy, the process of integration is across the board! As the cognitive tradition tools up to the demands of the new wave at the same time they are learning to work at relational depth, new style "experiential training workshops" are springing up at which these previously 'instrumental' practitioners are required to immerse themselves in and confront their own moment by moment experience.

There is a two way street across that bridge – whilst I can imagine CBT practitioners and their clients benefiting from the authenticity⁷ of this new wave, I can also see benefit for humanistic practitioners who find it possible to align themselves with this new way of working. Anyone else familiar with the frustrations and irritations associated with the one size fits all CBT hegemony, the 'only CBT practitioners need apply' signs in the job-centre window? Well, CBT is no longer what you think! (pun intended) Perhaps it is becoming more like the way you work?

Mindfulness is a best fit English translation for the Pali language term *Citta* used in the original Buddhist teachings – when translated to Japanese and then back to English we get Mind/heartfulness. Awkward but tells us more – tells us that mindfulness applies inclusively to emotions, body sensations, moods, sense data, as well as to thoughts.

Tells us too, that as the CBT tradition becomes more mindful it becomes more heartfelt, more present, more relational, more tender.

The eight week groups, MBSR as progenitor, - with their emphasis on commitment to daily practice between weekly meetings – essentially provide the group support and encouragement for participants to establish (and maintain, as follow up studies have shown) their own daily mindfulness practice comprising meditation, yoga and exercises to promote mindfulness in daily life.

The emphasis in ACT is as a one to one therapy (though it can be a vehicle for group work or self-help – the intriguingly entitled "Get out of your mind and into your life" is a self help manual which also serves as a useful complement to one to one therapy.)

ACT illuminates the ways that language entangles clients into futile attempts to wage war against their own inner lives. Through metaphor, paradox, and experiential exercises clients learn how to make healthy contact with thoughts, feelings, memories, and physical sensations that have been feared and avoided. Clients gain the skills to recontextualise and accept these private events, develop greater clarity about personal values, and commit to needed behaviour change. Note that the emphasis is no longer on challenging

or changing internal thoughts and other events but on acceptance and re-contextualisation.

We spent time briefly exploring 'the hexa-flex' - the core processes of ACT. The general goal of ACT is to increase psychological flexibility: the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behaviour when doing so serves valued ends. Psychological flexibility is established through six core ACT processes. Each of these areas is conceptualized as a positive psychological skill, not merely a method of avoiding psychopathology:

Acceptance is taught as an alternative to experiential avoidance.

Cognitive defusion techniques attempt to alter the undesirable functions of thoughts and other private events, rather than trying to alter their form, frequency or situational sensitivity. Colloquially put, 'thoughts are not facts'.

Being Present: ongoing non-judgmental contact with psychological and environmental events as they occur.

Self as Context (context *for* experience vs self as content of experience) - fostered in ACT by mindfulness exercises, metaphors, and experiential processes.

Values: chosen qualities of purposive action that will never be obtained as an object but can be instantiated moment by moment. ACT uses a variety of exercises to help a client choose valued life directions in various domains (e.g. family, career, spirituality) while undermining verbal processes that might lead to choices based on

avoidance, social compliance, and so on.

Committed Action Finally, ACT encourages the development of larger and larger patterns of effective action linked to chosen values. In this regard, ACT looks very much like traditional behaviour therapy. It's in the goal-setting and subsequent homework tasks that the old psychological barriers are encountered and then other components of the hexa-flex are employed to defuse, accept, be with & stay focussed, re-contextualise etc in order that life becomes lived more and more in the service of what is valued and less and less in the service of avoiding difficulties.

Some of the above is excerpted from the very informative contextual psychology web-site: <http://www.contextualpsychology.org/>

Maybe the prospect of those core-processes makes this approach sound 'technique driven'? But I can report, from attending a recent two day ACT intermediate training, that neither the 'relational depth' of the trainer role-play demonstration nor the predominantly experiential nature of the training exercises would have been out of place on a diploma in person centred counselling!

In the last phase of the workshop we talked of a recent review article, Shapiro et al, 2006 entitled 'Mechanisms of Mindfulness'. The authors, acknowledging rapidly growing evidence base establishing the efficacy of mindfulness & acceptance approaches, seek to address the questions how? and why?

Jon Kabat Zinn's pithy definition of mindfulness: 'Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the

present moment, and non-judgementally' (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1994) is re-presented as three fundamental 'axioms' of mindfulness:

Intention: from becoming less stressed/managing anxiety, to being more compassionate, to becoming a fully realised human being ... intentions can change along the way; studies (Shapiro, D. 1992) have concluded that outcomes correlate with intentions!

Attention: suspending all ways of interpreting experience in order to attend to experience itself as it presents in the here and now. Important aspects include: vigilance, switching (ability to shift focus at will) and cognitive inhibition (ability to inhibit secondary elaborative processing of thought)

Attitude: ...paying attention with an affectionate, compassionate, friendly interest. Non-judgementalism, acceptance.

The axioms are posited as interwoven aspects of a single, cyclic, simultaneous process.

(We digressed in the workshop next to consider how Rogers' original core conditions might map onto a 'self as subject' / 'self as object' dyad. Perhaps the phrase 'A way of Selfing' could serve as an illustrative intrapersonal alternative to 'A way of being' in interpersonal relationship?)

Proposing a theory, Shapiro et al suggest that through the process of mindfulness one is able to dis-identify from the contents of experience; a mental shift in perspective they term 're-perceiving'. Re-perceiving can be described as a rotation in consciousness in which what was previously subject becomes object. This shift has been proposed by developmental psychologists (Kegan,

1982) as key to development and growth across the lifespan. If 're-perceiving' is a meta-mechanism underlying mindfulness, then mindfulness is 'simply a continuation of the naturally occurring human developmental process whereby one gains increasing capacity for objectivity about one's own internal experience'.

This is in close accord with Ken Wilber's oft repeated assertion that research evidence shows meditation to be the only practice shown to enable an ongoing upward movement in adulthood through the developmental stages suggested in his AQUAL integral model. Accordingly, within the burgeoning integral learning community springing up around his monumental work, Integral Life Practice (ILP – a kind of psycho-spiritual cross-training workout routine) incorporates mindfulness practice as an essential component.

In the interest of a balanced picture, as I bring this article to a close, (lest my enthusiasm has begun to suggest - of the mindfulness approach - a universal panacea), ILP also includes as equally essential a 'Shadow Work' component. Recognising that one can only bring to awareness that which is 'in awareness' Wilber, as has Jack Kornfield, recommends that the natural urge towards maturation afforded by mindfulness be supplemented; pushed through the glitches of unconscious patterning/ shadow material. Traditional psychotherapy - of various traditions - continues to rise to meet this challenge via the crucible of interpersonal encounter. Re-perceiving, however, is once again called upon on in the subsequent, enabling process of 'transcend and include'. It's what allows us to incorporate the *apparently alien* nature of the 'shadow brought to light'. Mindfulness and Acceptance.

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