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The Art of Observation and Experience

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Mindfulness practices aim to develop intentional awareness of the present moment. This paper touches on two of the difficulties that may arise in the course of such practice. On the one hand, the present moment may be overwhelming if there is an over-identification with the content that the practices uncover. On the other hand, the present moment may seem excessively foreign if there is an over-identification with the witnessing of such content. Art can prevent an over-identification on both poles of this equation by acting as a container for content, a source of somatic discharge, and a facilitator for observing relationships with images, art processes, oneself and others. Because art embraces both content and the observation of content, it is ideal for witnessing-experiencing.

Keywords: *art, contemplative action, witnessing-experiencing, mindfulness, witness consciousness*

“Is the observer different from the observed?
When you are angry, envious, brutal, violent, are you not all that?”

—J. Krishnamurti, 1983, para. 10.

On the out breath a green drop is squeezed out of a tube. It free-falls and arrives at a bed of pristine white shaving cream, thick enough to hold the drop without allowing it to splatter extensively. A pause on the in breath is followed by another drop falling on the out breath: blue this time around. When it lands, the drop makes a sound. What do you notice? What do you perceive? This instant, what arises in unison with your act of creating?

I wrote the passage above after leading a workshop where artistic processes were intentionally used as mindfulness practices. Through every round of breath, practitioners were asked to trail an exhale along with making a liquid paint splatter. Breath was both manifested and perceived. Splatters were both created and observed. Every squeeze became a potential reminder of the singular quality of the present moment.

During these experiences the spaciousness around and within each liquid paint drop may be sensed along with the light that it touches as it free-falls. The images created may bring associations: rain forests, cake frostings, witches. The metaphors found through these processes invite emotions. Fluid shaving cream might evoke a lack of control, and with it maybe joy arises, maybe fear. At times a strong witnessing presence

acknowledges artistic phenomena and its evocations as passing. At times the art allows identification with aspects of the self that had been shy to express themselves otherwise. In other moments the art shakes and captures its creator; contemplative action unfolds; flow.

Mindfulness and Witness Consciousness

Vedic and Buddhist philosophies come from the same roots in spite of their multiple manifestations (Maharaj, 2013). In this paper, I refer to various authors within these traditions, as well as some contemporary psychologists with relevant perspectives. The differences amongst the frameworks mentioned are beyond the scope of this paper, so I explore their commonalities only as connected to the view of artistic processes as they are here presented.

The Sanskrit word *smṛti* has been interpreted as remembrance of the present moment, as constant experiencing of the changing mind, and as vigilance of the self (Maharaj, 2013). Buddhist monk Sântideva defined it as a guided remembering of a specific object of meditation. The Vedic concept of *smṛti* exists as *sati* in Pāli (Pas, 1995), the liturgical language of Buddhism. For the purpose herein I refer to both terms as *mindfulness* and accredit them with the meaning of *sati*, as explained by Theravadan Buddhist monk Bhante Gunaratana (2011).

Mindfulness is an action of encompassing awareness, with an interest in the way things are; it is the act of observing impartially and without bias, unattached yet without repression (Gunaratana, 2011). Mindfulness is the “participatory observation” (p. 135) of personal experiences, feelings, thoughts and perceptions, as they arise moment to moment. This intentional present-moment attention that allows for awareness to arise (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) has been described as open-ended, non-judgmental, and accepting (Risom, 2010). The practice of observation entails a patient, compassionate and non-striving attitude (Bishop et al., 2004) that maintains an interest in immediate experience; it is curiosity towards what is, regardless of what is.

During meditation practices, phenomena within a practitioner’s stream of consciousness can be observed as passing clouds, a process often referred to as *witnessing* (Prendergast, 2007, p. 49). There are different perspectives regarding “the subject” of such witnessing. Who is the observer? Who notices thoughts, words and deeds? In some Indian and Buddhist philosophies the subject is viewed as an aspect of the self, capable of self-observation, and sometimes understood as our *true nature*. Yet some traditions such as Advaita Vedanta and the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism ultimately challenge the notion of subject as separate from object (A. Francis, personal communication, January, 21, 2015).

In Sanskrit, the observer that observes itself, with “a direct apprehension of reality” (Matthijs, 2011, p. 341), is termed *sākṣi*. *Sākṣi* is not the result of a relationship to what is observed (Akhilananda, 2014), nor is it based on mental activity (Matthijs, 2011). *Sākṣi* is rather “the unchangeable reality [that] remains only as witness” (Akhilananda, 2014, p. 29). *Sākṣibhāva* denotes an individual’s identification with the “subject that is aware of the object” (Ramakrishnananda, 2014, p. 127), and refers to the subject as our *Ātman*, our eternal “True Self” (p. 127). For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to *sākṣibhāva* as Witness Consciousness, a term that has gained wide use amongst Western meditators. Mindfulness practices, the action of witnessing ones immediate field of experience with acceptance, can lead Witness Consciousness.

Contemplative Dissociation and Over-Identifying with the Witness

On the path to recognition of one’s internal witnessing awareness, the benefits of mindfulness are many. Tranquility, calmness, insight, flexibility, tolerance, and

compassion flourish with the practice (Gunaratana, 2011). By improving the tracking and management of difficult emotions, mindfulness practices can help to regulate emotional avoidance and over engagement, positively affecting mental health (Hayes & Feldman, 2004, p. 255). However, Gunaratana (2011) warned that problems, such as pain, fear, anxiety, drowsiness, or an inability to concentrate, inevitably arise during mindfulness practice. Premature contact with difficult emotions can lead to emotional disengagement (p. 258), or as Hayes and Wilson (2003) phrased it:

Any approach that encourages non-evaluative contact with events that are here and now will necessarily also lead to increased contact with previously avoided private events, because these private events will eventually be here and now, and a non-evaluative, nonjudgmental approach to them will inherently increase contact. (pp. 163-164)

While sitting on the cushion and returning the attention to the breath or the body, old wounds may come up that overwhelm the nervous system (Treleaven, 2010). Treleaven coined the term *contemplative dissociation* to describe “a disconnection between thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations that is exacerbated by contemplative practice” (p. 20).

To prevent “disembodied meditators” (p. 22) Treleaven (2010) proposed contemplative practices that are supported by safe interpersonal contact, therapeutic containment, and environments that welcome the rhythms and movements of the physical body. During cognitive-behavioral therapy for depressed clients, Hayes and Feldman (2004) studied the impact that mindfulness practices had on emotional regulation. To encourage a gradual increment in the tolerance of difficult content, they combined a paced increase in mindfulness practices with the development of problem solving skills, coping strategies, and healthy-lifestyle behavior.

A different pitfall may become apparent once practitioners are able to maintain a sustained non-elaborative attention to immediate experience. Non-dual psychotherapist John Prendergast (2007) described the problems that are posed for meditators, when they over-identify with such witnessing. When an over-identification with the witnessing of thoughts, feelings, and sensations takes place, the sense of disconnection from that which is being observed creates suffering. This separation between the observer and the observed

enables “dysfunctional mental and emotional patterns [to] persist” (Prendergast, 2007, p. 50). But mindfulness practice aims for receptivity to whatever is occurring in the present moment rather than dissociation from it (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006, p. 379). It seeks witnessing without identification to content; however, it aspires to a clear awareness, even of strong emotions, and strong emotion implies deep experiencing. To prevent an alienating distance, Prendergast (2007) suggested, “witnessing from the inside or a watching-experiencing that includes a dimension of intimate feeling” (p. 50).

Contemplative dissociation is a defense that comes up when mindfulness practitioners become overly identified with evoked content. On the other pole, contemplative dissociation comes up in the context of impartially observing experience. A balancing act comes to mind: It is, paradoxically, the heightened capacity to perceive without identifying with content, that paves the road for practitioners to remain intimately connected to experience. Meanwhile, in both the initial and subsequent stages of the development of mindfulness, it is a reliable and safe relationship with the world of form (healthy behavior, feeling, friendly attitude towards oneself, or body discharge, for instance) that seems to foster a healthy and true development of Witness Consciousness.

Art: Ideal for Witnessing and Experiencing

Art products and processes that are unlimited by expectations, aesthetic judgments or comparisons and are infused with compassion and acceptance, are natural tools for developing a willed present moment attention (Allen, 2005; Franklin, 1999; Kossack, 2008). Elsewhere I have described some of the qualities of art that lend themselves well to practices of contemplation (Salom, 2013). The concrete aspects of art supplies, with their tactile features and colorful traits, focus attention by engaging the body in direct experiences of the present moment. This engagement of the body allows contemplative action to spontaneously occur by permitting a simultaneous creation and observation of art products, art processes, and the unveiled content that these bring up. This process of creation-observation intrinsically invites artists to perceive themselves through the creative act. The tangible engagement with the present-moment world includes room for feelings, thoughts, sensations, breath, behavior, and relationships. While immersed in art, a witnessing and an experiencing of the world of form can happen at the same time.

The Art of Observation and Experience

Art: Content and Container

It is common for the rich and varied stimuli of art materials to evoke moving subject matter. Just looking at art supplies can provoke intimate associations. During extended periods of creation, artists are usually very concentrated and open to whatever may arise. As in many meditation practices, this combination can soften the habitual patterns that ward off emotional material. Furthermore, the non-verbal aspects of art often provide access to emotional content past well-established verbal defenses.

Simple processes held within a safe relational space allow emotional content to reveal itself. Despite an invitation to focus only on body sensations, as in the following example taken from my group notes, sometimes participants' content will come up anyway:

John holds a piece of clay in his hand. He squeezes it automatically for about five minutes. At first, he has no associations with the squeeze, but when contemplating it later, he relates the mark left by the contracting force of his fingers to specific personal struggles. He is surprised that random pinches can produce associations so closely related to his present life circumstance. The projected meaning that he finds surprises him. Its significance surpasses the expectations he had while playing with the clay.

The benevolence of art processes in relationship to unexpected content is that art unconditionally holds and braces uncovered subject matter. John's pinch was incited by the clay, expressed through the clay, and also nested in the clay. The clay became a means of expression, and at the same time a container for that being expressed. Paper, wood, and photo cameras often act as structures into which a person's particular views can be poured. A canvas will not reject any cognitive or emotional symbols. Like unconditional acceptance a canvas will equally uphold an image of debility or a portrait of courage.

Art materials provide malleable substance to be shaped according to what human kind needs to express. Just as art practices can bring up difficult subject matter (and offer a container for it), contact with divine aspects of the self also flourish (and are equally contained). Clay will take the shape of a strained pinch, as well as a soft caress. Cloth is receptive to pokes, pulls and scissors; and stone to the certainty and the doubts of our chisels. The material world will not disintegrate as one expresses

through it (unless one intentionally wants it to). This unconditionality can mirror a comforting receptivity, a trust, and a sense of reliability in the way things are.

Art can be understood and used according to the needs of the observer. This makes art into an ever-reliable practice for self-discovery. When art processes are used as mindfulness practices, art products result from the contemplative act itself. Like the processes, and the materials used, these works of art can be the objects of contemplation (Allen, 2005; Mc Niff, 1992).

The autonomous existence of art objects can boldly manifest the roused content back to the artist (Hanes, 2001). Observing an art piece includes witnessing its personal voice and its content as made evident through patterns, contrasts, and textures in present moment existence. Such phenomena provide a model for witnessing internal material. The content, like the object, is one's own, and yet one can observe it as separate from oneself (McNiff, 1992; Moon, 2004). Every individual can be aware of the space around it, of the space between the object and the witness. The distance may soften one's identification.

Because art pieces have durability and longevity, they become part of ongoing dynamics (Hinz, 2013). The content of an image and its hues continues to unfold with time. Perceptions of the art object may shift dramatically, through both changes in the viewer's subjective frame, and through the objective effects of time on the material world. The object is infinite insofar as there is a relationship to it, and through the relationship observing and experiencing unfold.

Art: Relationship and the Observation of Relationship

Making and sharing art in the company of others adds a dimension of experience in which the richness of interpersonal relationships can be experienced and witnessed. Each participant's art processes and images become important agents in the sphere of relationship, and thus in the realm of watching-experiencing. A cohesive group can act as the guru (teacher, in Sanskrit), when it encourages the person deeper into who they are, reflects them, complements them, and invites them into an expanded nature, while preventing them from merging with either content or witness.

A complete fusion with the internal witness is challenged by the demands of relating within a group setting. The interactions which art processes provoke can reveal personal patterns of relating. Habitual behavior manifests when sharing, for example, a limited number

of art supplies, or a restricted amount of space. The variety of diverse responses to a single art directive can provide information about one's identity. When trust between group members is established, reactions to another's creative ability can provide important insights. Others' processes may be understood as orderly or hyper-controlled, fun or overwhelming. Images may be inspiring or repulsive. One's relationships to images may move them to compassion or anger. Through the act of creating together, traits of the personality are played out.

The group may also help a person to face their own content less personally. The art processes and the images created by the group, remind participants that most personal experiences are not foreign to others (Yalom, 1995): the struggles brought to consciousness by John's pinch were common to many members in the group. Sharing reactions about art can also remind one of different perspectives, thus helping an individual relate to their own standpoint with spaciousness and room for differences. The image of a rainforest, which someone found terrifying, was re-signified when someone else expressed that he found it exhilarating. This dynamic aspect of relationship with art and with the other can help one understand content as fluid in nature; the meaning that one attributes to content is not unchangeable (Hinz, 2013). The group can celebrate content, as group members model equanimity or risk-taking abilities in the face of artistic challenges; as participants integrate for example the kindness found in an image, or the spontaneity, by identifying these qualities within themselves. It can be a relief to find that a process one found excruciating bore the fruit of motivation for another; that overwhelming content can later be seen as manageable. Images of witches can be frightening, but also powerful and transformative, according to our present moment subjectivity.

By creating together in a compassionate and open-ended environment, individuals can build bonds that offer the reassurance needed for the contemplative way. Ideally, the quality of the interactions, regardless of what they entail in their content, are supportive of the tender soil of creation. If this is so, the group's creative process is usually enhanced by a safe space where interpersonal dynamics can be viewed and perhaps even addressed. If the climate of the group is bathed in a non-judgmental friendliness to what the present moment contains, then relationships with others and with imagery can remain alive as they are attested. Interpersonal contact can serve

to remind that the development of mindfulness is useful for a healthy connection with others; that witnessing provides room for contact and exchange.

Art: Action and the Observation of Action

By engaging in action, a meditator's fixed identification with the witness cannot be maintained for too long. Materials maintain their makeup and their limits, even as creators transform them through art's alchemical processes. The dimensions of physical form keep one grounded in the world of matter. The possibility of merging with the observer is diminished when having to decide whether an image would be better expressed in wire or thread, or when facing an unintended mark on a page and discovering the need to use the accident creatively. Visual arts materials have limitations that challenge one to find technical and expressive solutions, and through these processes to track reactions and behaviors.

The sole identification with the observer is also subdued through contemplative art making given that the observation can happen through fingertips, eardrums, and nostrils as well as through eyes. Art materials intimately engage the senses and produce emotional and cognitive reactions (Hinz, 2009). Since both the observation and the artistic action are multi-sensorial, it is easy for the observation to include the experience. It is also easy to trust the movements that the body desires to make while being in the midst of spontaneous creation; when materials shift in agreement with somatic impulses and intentions.

Sometimes a distinctive type of unity occurs: watching/experiencing becomes so intimately connected that it needs no tracking; it cannot be tracked, it just is. Such unity is not uncommon during art making. Artists have often reported feeling immersed in present moment inventiveness. Many describe the creative impulse as a force that travels through them, past their intentional control. Artist John Anderson said, "wonderful paintings come out of a deep and profound silence" (F. Bogzaran, personal communication, November 21, 2011); Michelangelo expressed "genius [as] eternal patience" (Miller, 2004, p. 85). Da Vinci said that, "The minds of men of lofty genius are most active in invention when they are doing the least external work" (Croche, 2995, p. 147). They step aside and surrender into their creative urges.

An aura of deep trust is sensed when artists give in as beholders to the actions that come forth through

them, to doing without doing, to creating without strain. They refer to contemplative action, the complete merging with an activity done in the present moment, in a way that produces an effortless action that is simultaneously done and observed. By being so profoundly included, both the action and the observation of the action disappear (Allen, 2005). A functioning harmony takes over. There is only sculpting, painting, breathing, being, flow; no effort, no interference.

Art: A Wide Focus of Attention

Let me go back to the initial query and include Krishnamurti's (1983) immediate response: "Is the observer different from the observed? When you are angry, envious, brutal, violent, are you not all that? The meditator is the meditation. ... The observer is the observed" (para. 10). I see this unity present when witnessing artistic processes, as illustrated by the questions in my notes:

Participants track precise sensations with crayons. They also invite non-judgmental attitudes and a witnessing of it all. A summoning into the present moment is implicitly offered by the practice itself, by the intention of the group as a whole, by the rhythm to which the crayons are being moved. The tangible quality of some of the doodles produced a palpable evidence of content. The same concrete quality communicates spaciousness in some other of the scribbles, a sense that they are coming out of a particular gist of flow. A participant shares about the tinges that come up for her. She sees her weak crayon marks as expressions of sadness. In unison self-awareness is mirrored to her by the active listening of a few members in the group. Are her doodles a reflection of who she is? Or is her true reflection the witnessing activated in her through the deep listening? Is she not each and more than each? The spaciousness encompassing it all as well as the dense feeling of the moment? Is the combination not a part of every member present in the group?

Many mindfulness practices intentionally incorporate a focus of attention wide enough to include the experiencer, the experience, and the experiencing. Action is integrated in watching-experiencing. In true *sākṣībhāva*:

not only do we not identify with the results of our actions, we don't identify with the actions themselves.



Figure 1. "Experiencing Observation," (2014), Ink on dyed Paper, approx. 4 x 4.5 in.

Whatever we do is a spontaneous response to the circumstances that present themselves to us. We will do whatever is needed in a given situation, but in this state, we remain a witness to both our actions and our experiences. (Ramakrishnananda, 2014, p. 127)

Integral yoga places an emphasis on "being that which is happening" (M. A. Ángel, personal communication, Oct. 10, 2013); on experiencing the realm of manifested forms, and observing while fully feeling the sensations that are present. "The observer, the observed, and the act of observing" (Ángel) are all considered. These can be called "the player, the game, and the field of the game" (Ángel)—the knower, the known, and the knowing, all three encompassed by Witness Consciousness. Adyashanti expressed it beautifully:

What it means to be fully awake is to be not only fully conscious but to be fully feeling, to be fully experiencing...On the level of experience, when we are watching, we now feel that we are watching from inside the experience, or in the midst of it. The paradox is that the watching, even though it's inside experience and all around experience, it is not caught by experience. It's not identified even though it's so mixed in there that you can't distinguish it. (Prendergast, 2007, p. 50)

Thích Nhất Hạnh's (2005) words make this inclusive understanding further accessible:

If I have a feeling of anger, how would I meditate on that? ... I know that anger is me, and I am anger. Nonduality, not two. I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with nonviolence. Because anger is me, I have to tend to my anger as I would tend a younger brother or sister, with love, with care, because I myself am anger, I am in it, I am it. (pp. 46- 47)

In contemplative art making, experiencing subjectively is as important as objective and spacious contemplations. Personality and conditioning have room, as do the dropping of them—innocence and silence. "What is," in the arts as in daily life, is often relational, animate, cognitive, behavioral, and substantial (Figure 1). Sometimes what is, includes the witnessing of all that—colors, textures, forms and the witnessing of it all. What is may be witnessed, and more than that, experienced; experienced, and more than that, witnessed; both.

Conclusion

A non-judgmental relationship with the thick matter of art materials can offer a gradual exposure to the charged content, which can surface with present moment attention. Materials are available into which individuals can discharge their somatic energy. Their physical pliability will hold our symbols, indiscriminately of content. They are a model of unrestricted reception.

Because of art's malleability as a tool, individuals can shift the purpose of artistic processes according to what they choose as their object of contemplation. Art pieces and processes can help one experience, express, and observe their content in safe ways. Because art objects take an independent space in the realm of form, they can remind of the spaciousness around reoccurring mental themes. Because the relationships that artists build with art processes are ongoing, they offer room for paced processing. By being material, relational, and charged with potential subject matter, art products and processes can also prevent one from an over-identification with the witness. Art practices can be used to observe and experience any subject of interest: content, relationship, witness, space.

The life-energy of the objective and the life-energy of the subjective have a concurrent presence through the creation of images. Inner and outer realms interact through art's bridging. Creativity can

focus attention on both essence and form, on silence and sound, on spaciousness and substance. Art can be used as a mindfulness practice to help cultivate Witness Consciousness; art embraces the whole; the painter, the painting, and the act of painting.

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