

Mindfulness and Not-Knowing

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In my previous posting “Mindfulness and Knowledge,” I wrote about the gift of connecting with our inner knowledge that we gain through the practice of mindfulness. This time I want to point out the quality of Not-Knowing that one can develop through mindfulness practice and the benefits of acquiring such quality and approach to life.

There are three kinds of not-knowing:

1. Letting go of what we know - We tend to categorize our experiences. When given names, titles and classifications we gain control over the situation. This tendency also helps to capture in a word or two a whole range of phenomena. If we go back again to the Garden of Eden - Adam, in the name of humanity, gave names to all animals and birds and in this way not only gain some superiority over them, but he also gained a better way to relate to them and communicate about them. Instead of describing this animal with yellow/ brownish color and fierce roar he can just say a lion, and the whole image and qualities of a lion will appear. This categorization is useful for communication and understanding, but the price is generalization and reactivity.

When a person experiences anxiety for instance, just calling the symptoms “anxiety” can bring a range of reactions such as fear, frustration, sadness, self defeating thoughts and avoidance. With mindfulness and a Not-Knowing approach the range of phenomena is explored with curiosity and openness: How does this feeling present itself in the body? What are the size, depth and boundaries of the sensation? Are they changing? If they are - in what way? This genuine exploration serves in therapy as a way to bypass identification of clients with their diagnosis - formal and informal - and come back to experiencing thoughts emotions and sensations as they are without the learnt reactivity that in many instances spirals the situation down. All emotions can be approached in a fresh mind, allowing discoveries and loosening the grip of concepts.

2. Letting go of what we don't know - This type of not-knowing relates to the ability not to plan and predict ahead of time what is going to happen. Of course, in many cases one needs to plan and be ready, but when the planning becomes rigid and restrictive this is a time to practice not-knowing: trusting the process, allowing it to unfold in a creative, fresh and innovative way. The tendency to want to know what is going to happen is tempting, but when we are mindful of every moment, allowing the not-knowing be part of how we live, we can try new things, like starting a business or a new career, embark on new adventures and develop meaningful relationships. In any case, stability is only an illusion. The reality is that we don't know what will happen next. Not-knowing connects us to things as they are, helps us to be released

from the illusion of stability and security. Being aware of the fragility of stability in a way encourages innovation, taking risks, exploring. This demands courage and strength, both in an ongoing cycled way are developed as we allow not-knowing to be present in our life.

One of the guidelines in the Interpersonal Mindfulness program that I teach (founded by Gregory Kramer, PhD) is Trust Emergence. The program teaches how to bring mindfulness to speaking and listening and to relationships. This guideline encourages participants to dive into the unknown, to trust the dialogue to be developed without having an agenda, to allow ourselves to not-know how the conversation will develop and how it will end. Trust emergence encourages new ideas, surprising discoveries and it opens the door to closeness and trust among the people involved in the process.

3. Living with open questions - There are many decisions to make and questions to answer every day, from the most mundane like what I shall wear today, to making decisions at work, to the spiritual inquires about the purpose of life. Usually we are compelled to give answers, and they better be the correct ones. Without taking away the importance of having solutions and knowing the right answers, in many instances there is a value in just being with a question. This kind of not-knowing calls for patience, humbleness, openness, centering and inspiration. "Sitting with an open question" is one of my favorite meditations and I offer it to clients when appropriate. Living with an open question gives the freedom to explore, contemplate and open an inner space that releases from tightness and holding. In a mysterious way, the chance to eventually come to an answer that makes sense and is satisfying increases tremendously.

This last sentence brings us back to the article, "Mindfulness and Knowledge." You can see that those two contradicting statements - Mindfulness as knowing and mindfulness as not-knowing are basically one - they complement each other and represent together the wholeness and richness of leaving mindfully.

Related reading:

Mindfulness and Knowledge

<http://www.yaelschweitzer.com/docs/mindfulnessandknowledge.pdf>