

Applied Mindfulness: the Hakomi Way

by Donna Martin

If you can observe your own experience with a minimum of interference, and if you don't try to control what you experience, if you simply allow things to happen and you observe them, then you will be able to discover things about yourself that you did not know before. You can discover little pieces of the inner structures of your mind, the very things that make you who you are. (Ron Kurtz)

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a quiet inward way of paying attention, where many aspects of one's present experience can be simply noticed: physical, mental, emotional, as well as all manner of sensory experiences. There is an opportunity in mindfulness to become conscious of things that usually go unnoticed. Being relaxed to begin with helps to cultivate this quiet state of what meditation teachers sometimes call "choiceless awareness". It arises spontaneously at times, and can be invited simply by interrupting whatever we are doing to pause and witness our present experience.

In mindfulness we become a silent witness to our experience – moment to moment. The essence of mindfulness is to be fully present to this moment, whatever it is: our thoughts, images, memories, breathing, body sensations, the sounds and smells and tastes, moods and feelings and the quality of present experience as a whole, as well as of the various parts. In mindfulness we are not just having thoughts and feelings about our experience, we are also noticing our thoughts and feelings... just noticing.

The Hakomi Way

Hakomi is a way of using applied mindfulness for self discovery and emotional healing. Originally created as a method of psychotherapy, Hakomi has evolved to a much wider application. Now is known as a mindfulness-based approach that is used not only by psychologists, psychotherapists, counselors, social workers, and bodyworkers, but also by teachers, coaches, and other helping professionals, as well as by ordinary people of all ages and walks of life who want to understand themselves and others and live more mindfully and compassionately.

Hakomi is a gentle yet powerful way to apply mindfulness specifically to reveal and transform the underlying beliefs and habits affecting how we experience life. It is effective for managing and transforming stress, burnout, health and relationship issues, and all sorts of other life challenges.

Practising Applied Mindfulness: the Hakomi Way with others can create peaceful caring relationships and communities.

Daniel Siegel, in *The Mindful Brain*, says:

Mindfulness evokes a reverberant dynamic interaction among three dimensions of well-being – neural, mind, and relational. Our social resonance circuitry is well-suited to participate in this triangle of well-being, linking together the mapping of intention with neural integration and the ways in which we attune to each other, and to ourselves.

When we are willing to take a look at how we are unconsciously and habitually reacting to others and to life, how our experience is being automatically organized according to old assumptions and attitudes, Hakomi is an effective way of supporting this journey of discovery.

Along the way to more conscious awareness there is often an **emotional healing** process that takes place. Emotions triggered within a state of mindful awareness can reveal stories of unnecessary suffering, of old hurts or unfinished business, of unknown barriers to certain kinds of nourishing experiences. When this is witnessed and supported in a Hakomi way it becomes possible to find comfort and new meaning around painful experiences, to initiate an end to our unnecessary suffering, and to find new sources of nourishment in life. This is assisted self-discovery based on applied mindfulness: the Hakomi Way.

This neutrality is an important characteristic of mindfulness. In this state of mind, our attention is open and receptive, spacious, and receptive. In the Hakomi Way, a person's ability to report the experience, to verbally describe what is being witnessed, is an essential ingredient if mindfulness is to become an effective path for this **journey of assisted self-discovery**.

Applied Mindfulness: the Hakomi Way has applications in areas such as education, business, community development, parenting, support groups, and social services. It is useful for all who find themselves in helping roles with others.

Of course, applied mindfulness is not just for helpers. It is relevant for any of us who are willing to look at ourselves in order to understand and transcend limiting beliefs and habits... particularly the habitual ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, acting and reacting that cause unnecessary suffering – for us or others - or ones that limit the ways in which we can be nourished and fulfilled by life.

This approach is applicable in any number of interpersonal settings. And it has nothing to do with correcting, fixing, or "should-ing". It is about discovery, wellbeing, and personal freedom.

In this approach there is a shift away from the helper as the expert (whether it is as a therapist, teacher or parent, doctor, minister, or social worker, etc). Instead of expertise as such, we think of the helper being very skilful in certain important ways.

As helpers in the Hakomi Way, we want to maintain a true **spirit of collaboration**, which is not possible within a hierarchical system where the helper is an expert who knows something the other doesn't know. This lacks respect and is not the spirit in which a true healing alliance is founded.

Dogen, the Zen master who brought Zen from China to Japan, is most famously quoted as saying:

"To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things; your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains and this no trace continues endlessly."

Although this bridges the relative ("...to study the Buddha way is the study the self.") and the absolute (... "forgetting the self..."), Hakomi is an amazing doorway into this study of the self. Self study in mindfulness is its core practice. The freedom that can come with this study is our aim, whether it is negotiating the relative with more freedom or opening to the ultimate in deep practice. Its fruit is Wisdom and Compassion. (Flint Sparks)

In Hakomi, when we are invited to be someone's companion on their path of self discovery, we let them know that our role is to be a compassionate witness... loving and appreciative, interested and curious, and attentive both to the experience they are having and to the unconscious ways they seem to be organizing their experience.

*According to the buddhadharma, spirituality means relating with
the working basis of one's existence, which is one's state of mind.
The method for beginning to relate directly with mind
is the practice of mindfulness.
(Chögyam Trungpa)*

But what do we mean by *mindfulness*?

Mindfulness is an ancient tradition in eastern spiritual practices... it is a form of meditation which is sometimes called "choiceless awareness".

Typically mindfulness meditation is practised with the eyes partly open. There is a tendency, when we close our eyes, to drift somewhere away from present moment wakefulness, to get sleepy, or to get lost in thoughts or images, in memory or imagination. This is not mindfulness. Mindfulness is being calmly wide awake.

*Beneath the veil of self-identity that clouds clear vision
rests a spaciousness of mind present in each of us.
Mindful awareness makes that clarity more than a possibility,
but a directly experienced reality.*

Mindfulness is a way of relaxing and yet staying **fully awake**... being a witness to whatever arises in consciousness. It is spacious, open, non-striving, non-searching, and non-attached. It is a quieting or lowering of the noise of the mind to allow for more awareness of whatever is occurring.

Consciousness is like a window, open to the sky of the mind. In most of our waking moments, this window is seeing only a small view of the sky. In mindfulness, the window seems to get bigger, allowing for a larger view. Sometimes the view is obscured by mental noise, which is like pollution.

One year, my hotel room in Tokyo had a view of Mt Fuji which was only visible on a clear day. Most days, the air was not clear enough to see the mountain. Same mountain, same window, different view every day.

Mindfulness is both spacious and clear. It is a state of mind that allows for more consciousness of present moment experience, whatever it is. Another analogy is that of the mind as like a body of water. What is visible on and below the surface is like consciousness. Usually, the choppy surface makes it difficult to see what's there. Taking a few moments to become calm and quiet allows more to surface into conscious awareness.

In mindfulness, there is no attempt to make anything happen. There is nothing to look for. There is nowhere to go.

In Applied Mindfulness: the Hakomi Way, as a way of assisting someone in their journey of self-discovery, we use simple **experiments** offered to the person we are supporting when they are in "mindfulness". We invite the person to simply take a moment to quietly notice what, *if anything*, happens in reaction to the experiment. We also track the person for any visible signs of a reaction.

For this applied mindfulness approach, we want to be willing to surrender old attitudes and preconceived ideas in order to open to the spontaneous unfolding of the healing process and allow the natural course of things to lead the way.

We can use applied mindfulness in this way to explore ourselves and to shift and open our own attitudes and ways of perceiving and responding. And we can practice relating to others in ways that feel safer, more appropriate and nourishing for all.

Francisco Varela had this to say about mindfulness:

We are dealing with two reversals of the most habitual cognitive functioning, of which the first is the condition for the second; the second cannot happen if the first has not already taken place... A turning of the direction of attention from the exterior to the interior... and a change in the quality of attention, which passes from the looking-for to the letting-come.

Applied mindfulness and Hakomi Skills

Let's look more closely at those skills that allow the Hakomi method of applied mindfulness to work successfully, including:

managing states of mind,
paying attention (tracking),
making hypotheses,
creating and facilitating experiments,
responding appropriately to what arises,
completing with a nourishing “missing” experience,
and managing the whole process effectively.

The first state of mind we want to manage is, of course, our own. Nothing will assist us in developing this capacity so much as a daily mindfulness practice. This means taking some time on a regular basis to simply quiet the mind and pay attention to whatever is happening inside and around us.

*Being fully present in our awareness
opens our lives to new possibilities of well-being.*

Daniel Siegel

Ron Kurtz: originator of the Hakomi Method, author of Body-Centered Psychotherapy: the Hakomi Method, and co-author of Grace Unfolding, and the Body Reveals.
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The Mindful Brain, (Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being, by Daniel Siegel (2007)