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MINDFULNESS & INTIMACY: JUST WHAT DO WE MEAN?

Susan Bourgerie

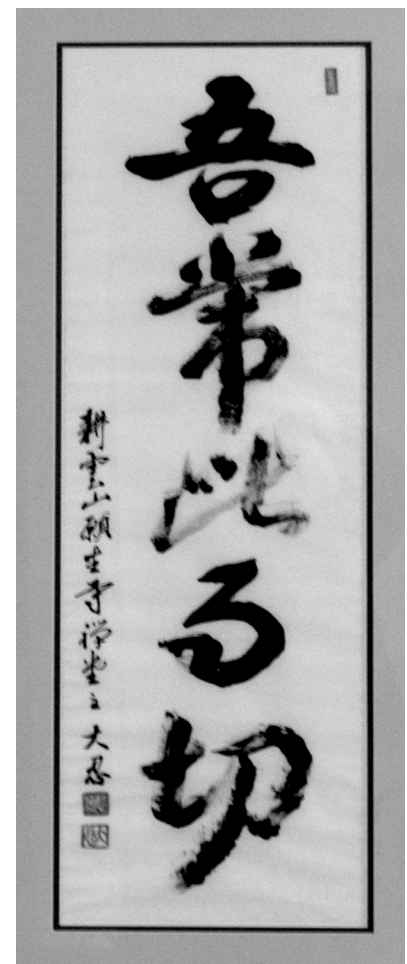
INTIMACY: so difficult to define. And what does mindfulness have to do with it? The Latin root of intimacy - *intimare* - means “to make familiar with.” Merriam Webster defines it as “belonging to or characterizing one's deepest nature. . . marked by very close association, contact, or familiarity”. Most often we use the word to refer to a depth of relating to a lover or life partner. “Google” the word and you’ll conclude intimacy has everything to do with sex, and that we’re obsessed with it!

This issue of *East-West Connections* focuses on intimacy and mindfulness in the context of relationships. A review of David Richo’s book *How to Be An Adult in Relationships* provides highlights of his thoughts on developing intimacy based on mindful loving. Our feature article focuses on the use of mindful speech and mindful listening to dissolve barriers to intimacy in primary relationships.

I find myself thinking, though, of the rich variety of intimate moments in my life that have nothing to do with another human being, yet are a foundation for intimate relating. For example, I’m known for getting wildly intimate with tea in its myriad varieties. In my rituals for mindfully preparing and serving tea I feel intimate connection with the nuances of aroma, color, temperature, and taste that characterize each of the myriad varieties of tea. The experience brings my senses alive, and my attention completely to the moment in a joyful experience of being fully present. Repeated mindful attention to such daily experiences will create many such experiences of intimacy that are vibrant and deeply satisfying. We show up for the life we’re living rather than missing it!

But to be intimate with life is also to face head on its less lovely aspects - difficult emotion, tormenting thoughts, physical pain, illness and death. Mindful, compassionate observing of our experience at such times will teach us that all thoughts and feelings are transient, and will develop strength and our capacity to thrive even under difficult circumstances.

A powerful piece of calligraphy hangs on my living room wall. It says “Always Close To This Here And Now”. Just this is the essence of intimacy - simply seeing and being completely present with things as they are, in all their glory and raggedness. It sounds simple, but it takes continual practice. It’s never too soon to begin. ☺



*“Always Close To This
Here And Now”
by Dainin Katagiri-roshi*

*In addition to her work as a
psychotherapist, **Susan Bourgerie**
practices zazen (Zen meditation)
and Japanese tea ceremony.*

BOOK

r e v i e w

How to Be an Adult in Relationships: The Five Keys to Mindful Loving

David Richo

Shambala Press, 2002

Sandra Kosse

I'm standing in one of my many favorite Starbucks, waiting for my extra hot, slightly wet cappuccino, when the barista asks me what I'm reading. I show her the book and as she scans the title - *How to be an Adult in Relationships* - anxiety tightens her face. She tells me, a bit crossly, "I think it's important to be a kid sometimes." I don't take this on as it's now the third time I've heard this reaction to this book—or to its title, anyway.

Admittedly it isn't a fun book, but it's not about squelching your inner child either. It is a thoughtful, responsible, serious look at what it takes to be present, accountable and responsive in relationships. If that sounds like work - it is. But, according to author David Richo, it's *good* work, or - to acknowledge the Buddhist influence on this book - it is *Right Work*. As with *Right Livelihood*, *Right Speech* and *Right Thought*, *Right* in this case carries connotations of goodness, ethics, interconnectedness and profound awareness.

This isn't fast food for the mind to be ingested while driving and talking on your cell phone. This is a rich book and, like a rich meal, should be taken in courses, at leisure, and with full attention. The writing is often wonderful, sprinkled with such phrases as "mindful love is bonding by commitment, not attachment by clinging," and "intimacy can only happen when you are always expanding in others' hearts, not pigeonholed in their minds."

David Richo takes a compassionate view of human beings and a trusting view of the universe. He assures us that the five essential requirements for nurturing an infant into an individual - attention, acceptance, allowing freedom, appreciation and affection - are the same "Five A's" we require to experience adult intimacy, both in its giving and its receiving. In addition, according to the author, the journey from individualism to partnership culminates in "the higher task of being couriers from the Self to all our fellow human beings." Although

we travel uniquely, we are all bound for a certain glory: "the broader love that is our real focus and destiny as enlightened beings."

He maintains that we are guided by a psychic blueprint that impels us to wholeness and that the same blueprint is installed in the larger universe so that "something, we know not what, is always at work, we know not how, but we do know why—to assist us in becoming free of fear and open to love."

Lest the reader start to twitch at all this expansive high-mindedness, Richo concludes each chapter with suggested practices for working here and now, on this earth and in this body, with all the shortcomings with which we and our partners are so fully endowed. Richo's five-star recommendation, the meta-practice he urges, is mindfulness—that willing capacity to become aware of our particular predicament and "cradle it without judgment, fear, blame, shame or expectation." Mindfulness is the *sine qua non* of intimacy with the self, with our special beloved and with all our other beloveds. The author provides charts, questions, and suggestions for journaling and interpersonal dialogue that support both bold and gentle probing.

I have a friend, a devoted psychotherapist and an even more devoted mother, who was telling her son one day about what she needed him to do. She reports that he turned to her, open and trusting, and said, "Mom, what you want is too much to expect from a boy who's only eleven."

I had that same reaction sometimes as I read this book. It is too much, consciousness is too hard, adult love is beyond my capacity. But anything else is too little. ☺

Sandra Kosse is an ardent reader, writer, mother of an 18-year-old son, and devoted psychotherapist herself.

Slowing Down In Order to Show Up: Mindfulness In Intimate Relationships

Cheri Desmond May

One of life's deepest and most profound human needs is to love and be loved. Our heart's longing is to be "known" and to be unconditionally accepted for who we are. This genuine, authentic connection with another human being is one of life's most precious gifts, and when it happens we count ourselves as blessed to have such intimacy grace our lives.

Yet often difficulties get in our way of giving and receiving this kind of emotional closeness, and our intimate relationships at times are fraught with conflict, disappointment, and disillusionment.

Mindfulness offers us a way to slow down from the frenetic pace of our 21st century lives, and give our relationships the time and quality of attention they need and deserve. It also teaches us that the difficult emotions and entanglements we experience in our primary relationships are actually opportunities for growth. Could we learn how to accept whatever feelings arise as an integral part of the couple journey? This process of learning to embrace both our own and our partner's imperfections and rough edges is what numerous authors have described as a mature, conscious, mindful love. (Hendricks, 1988; Richo, 2002; Welwood, 1990)

"When two partners appreciate that their connection invariably points them in the direction of growth, they can begin to regard any situation that comes up as a teacher."

- John Welwood

Mindfulness can be viewed as a prism through which we can learn to shine light on all our thoughts and emotions, and in so doing transform them into an eyes-wide-open, compassionate, wholehearted way of being in relationship.

Disconnection and conflict seem to arise as difficulties in the day-to-day lives of so many couples. Too often, any one of us may describe our

lives as so busy with careers, children, and outside commitments that we forget to make our relationship a priority in our lives. It is not unusual for our busyness to harden into a habit and our lack of feeling "in love" can lead us to question the relationship. Our "we-ness" is often sorely in need of a transfusion of time, positive regard, and attention filled with genuine presence. In short, we need to learn how to slow down in order to show up for each other. Learning the art and skill of mindfulness is one way to do just that.

Mindfulness, using Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition, is "paying attention, on purpose, without judgment." It is both an attitude and a practice. Mindfulness comes down to us from ancient Buddhist teachings, which suggest the value of cultivating a fresh awareness of the present moment (i.e. noticing a thought, feeling, impulse, reaction), and accepting it just as it is. As we practice acceptance of the way it is, we realize that this acceptance applies to our own and our partner's thoughts and emotions. The phrase "This is the way it is, it is just this way," may end up being a useful affirmation to remind us that acceptance is the doorway to understanding. So instead of reacting, blaming, defending, labeling as right or wrong, or being irritated about what the feelings are, we begin to see the situation as it is, and create a space in which to observe thoughts and feelings. In this way we develop an observing ego or a watcher inside of us that gives us some space to gain perspective. Such space allows us to *choose how to respond* rather than be tossed about in our usual maelstrom of reactivity. This is mindfulness.

This is particularly relevant in relationships where reactivity often rules the day. Partner A says or does something that pushes their partner's buttons, or triggers an emotional response, usually an engrained, habitual response. Partner B, who is triggered, then usually reacts by saying or doing something that triggers partner A, and the two are off to the races. These reactive interactions are often flavored with attack and defense strategies, with each person focused on what the other is doing, and feeling justified in defending oneself from attack.

Cultivating *Mindful Listening* is what is called for here. This is listening that is first focused on understanding the other person. This can be practiced by learning the skill of *containment*, or containing one's own thoughts and reactions until a true understanding has been achieved by just listening attentively (paying attention, on purpose, without judgment). Once this has been achieved for partner A, partner B talks while partner A practices deep listening with full attunement. By slowing down the interactive process each partner has a chance to be fully heard, acknowledged, and understood.

It is my belief that *feeling misunderstood* is at the heart of many couple conflicts and disconnections. When each partner simply (actually, it's not so simple in real life) stays with mindful listening until there is an empathic understanding of the other's innermost feelings and needs, a connection naturally occurs. Once a mutual understanding has been achieved in this manner, the couple may intuitively have arrived at a deeper realization, or be ready for a next step - perhaps a problem solving strategy. This process is at the heart of a healthy, intimate relationship—learning how to accept, allow and embrace the other. In learning to go outside of our self-centered universe and enter empathically into our partner's world, true intimacy develops. This is the fruit of bringing mindful and compassionate attention into the relationship.

Another central concept that mindfulness practice has to offer couples is that of *Mindful Speech* - the skill of speaking in such a way as to communicate honestly and kindly, taking care of when and how one chooses to speak so that the receiver may be

able to receive the message. Thich Nhat Hanh expresses this beautifully in this poem.

*In due season will I speak, not out of season.
In truth will I speak, not in falsehood.
Gently will I speak, not harshly.
For the benefit of the other will I speak,
Not for their loss.
In kindness will I speak, not anger.*

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that living by this precept is a wholesome way to cultivate loving relationships. Mindful speech is not reactive or defensive, not filled with judgments or blaming. It consists of "I" statements rather than "you" statements, and descriptions rather than accusations. Its purpose is deeper than just allowing the speaker to say what they have to say. It puts full responsibility on the speaker for communicating with intention, with thoughtfulness, and with an attitude of care.

An intention which strives to deepen understanding, to heal disconnection, and to be an avenue for repair will foster openness and intimacy. In order for this to happen each partner needs to take responsibility for being mindful (aware of) their own feelings, reactivity, and triggers. When these practices are integrated into a couple's way of relating to each other, compassion and empathy grow and blossom between them. In this way mindfulness practice waters the seeds of intimacy, and intimacy between partners is healing, fulfilling some of our most basic needs as human beings. ☺

Cheri Desmond May is a certified Imago Couple's therapist who is continually practicing slowing down in order to show up for clients, her family, and herself.

RESOURCES: relationship intimacy and mindfulness

- Kasl, C., (1999). *If the Buddha Dated: A handbook for finding love on a spiritual path*. New York: The Penguin Group.
- Hendrix, H. (1988). *Getting the love you want: A guide for couples*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Levine, S., & Levine, O. (1996). *Embracing the beloved: Relationship as a path of awakening*. New York: First Anchor Books.
- Nhat Hanh, T. (1996). *Teachings on love: How mindfulness can enhance your intimate relationship*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Richo, D. (2002). *How to be an adult in relationship: The five keys to mindful loving*. Boston: Shambala Press.
- Welwood, J. (1990). *Journey of the heart: The path of conscious love*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Welwood, J. (1996). *Love and awakening: Discovering the sacred path of intimate relationship*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Audiotapes:**
- Levine S. & Levine, O. (1997). *To love and be loved: The different yoga of relationship*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True.
- A website:**
- Traveling the pathways to intimacy: Some useful tools for your journey: www.steveshealyphd.com.*

RESEARCH r e v i e w

Carson, J., Carson, K., Gil, K., & Baucom, D. (2004). Mindfulness-based relationship enhancement. *Behavior Therapy*, 35, 471-494, 2004.

Signe Nestingen

Study Design and Procedures: Much research in the area of couples has focused on distressed couples and/or interventions to use with distressed couples. Carson, Carson, Gil, and Baucom (2004) elected to evaluate the effects of mindfulness-based enhancement skills on relatively happy, non-distressed couples. Hypothesizing that teaching mindfulness based practices, in addition to basic relationship building skills, would enhance general relationship satisfaction and individual well being, Carson, et al., studied 44 either married or cohabitating (one year or more) couples who did not exhibit relationship or psychological distress (using two distress index measures), and were not practicing yoga or meditation. Training in mindfulness practices was provided over the course of eight weekly sessions of 2½ hours each and a one day retreat with home practice and special partner time 6 days a week. In addition to a strong component in mindfulness (based on Kabat-Zinn's work), the training program utilized standard cognitive behavioral skill building exercises for couples. Carson et al., administered before and after (3 months post practice period) measures to determine relationship functioning and individual well-being. In addition, two weeks prior to and during the mindfulness practice period, participants kept daily stress logs. Half the participants, randomly wait-listed for a control group, tracked daily stress levels.

Study Outcomes: Most of the couples in this study adhered to a daily practice schedule, averaging 32 minutes of mindfulness-based practice each day. Study outcomes show a direct correlation between practice time and relationship satisfaction. Couples reported improved relationship satisfaction, autonomy, relatedness, closeness, and acceptance of partner. Carson et al., found that couples that participated in the intervention demonstrated less reactivity to daily stress and/or developed or deepened the process of responding to stress in a more efficient manner. An interesting note in the study: mindfulness practice on any given day was predictive of increased relationship happiness and more efficient methods of coping with stress for that, and the following, day. Finally, Carson et al., noted that those couples with greater relationship longevity were more likely to practice mindfulness and skill building exercises on a daily basis. Changes for individuals were also measured. Individuals reported a wide spectrum of improvements including increased optimism, spirituality, relaxation, and decreased stress and psychological distress.

The results of this study are encouraging. Further studies with more diverse couples and with follow up data collected at 6 and/or 12-month intervals would be instructive. Similarly, studies of couples experiencing distress might provide data leading to clinical application. ☺

Living mindfully is a daily practice for Signe.

RESOURCES: developing a mindfulness practice

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005) *Coming to our senses: Healing ourselves and the world through mindfulness*. Boston: Shambala Press.
Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994) *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion Press.
Nhat Hanh, T. (1975). *The miracle of mindfulness*. New York: Beacon Press.
Nhat Hanh, T. (1991) *Peace is every step*. New York: Bantam Books.
Tart, C. (1994). *Living the mindful life*. Boston: Shambhala Press.



East-West Connections is a collaborative effort to publish information of interest to our colleagues, clients, and others on the integration of Eastern wisdom and practices, and Western approaches to psychotherapy. If you have comments, questions, or would like to request that your name be added to or removed from this mailing list, contact any one of us.

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Jil works with adolescents, families, and adults in her clinical practice. In addition, with over 25 years of clinical experience, Jil provides consultation and supervision to individuals and groups.

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ANNOUNCING . . .

Cheri Desmond May will be offering a women's therapy group over the noon hour beginning in September

Susan Bourgerie will be offering a **NAIKAN PRACTICE RETREAT** this fall. Naikan is a Japanese practice of self-reflection that heightens awareness of our own actions and interconnections, and stimulates joy and gratitude.

CONTACT CHERI OR SUSAN FOR INFORMATION OR REFERRALS. (SEE CONTACT INFORMATION ABOVE.)