

Why Daily Mindfulness Practice Makes Better Systemic Constellations Practitioners

By Dr Christopher Walsh

Bert Hellinger emphasizes the central role of phenomenological method when facilitating family constellations. Yet very little attention has been devoted to how we can hone the skills necessary to use this method.

Fortunately such a technique has been practiced by Buddhists for over 2500 years and is now commonly referred to as mindfulness (Vipassana). It has increasingly been identified as the quintessential phenomenological method. (Varela et al 1993). Mindfulness has been defined as “the self regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, thereby allowing for the increased recognition of mental events in the present moment” and “a particular orientation towards one's experiences in the present moment, an orientation that is characterised by curiosity openness and acceptance.” (Bishop 2004)

Bert Hellinger's (1998) beautiful and poetic description of the phenomenological process below also implies an open curiosity and awareness.

“I open myself in darkness. The question is: How do I get to a truth concealed in darkness? I dive into a flowing field; I become part of it, and it reaches out beyond me. Things move in the field, some into areas of light, revealing something of whatever is. I open myself to that and wait for something to come to me.”

Mindfulness practitioners are very aware that becoming absorbed in thoughts and/or acting on autopilot interfere regularly and powerfully with this open awareness. While absorbed in our thoughts we miss the “things that move in the field” that Bert Hellinger describes above. While facilitating a constellation we can miss the sounds of the birds outside, the representative in the corner of the constellation coughing, the sense of fuzziness in the head as we walk past another representative or we are so focused on thinking about an interrupted reaching out movement that we miss the strange words “you always loved strawberries” that for some unknown reason pop into our mind. It turns out later that these were the last words the client's grandfather said to the grandmother as a way of saying “I love you”. Those words wanted to be used in that particular constellation. We are more likely to sense these things if we can keep our awareness as open as possible.

The core training practice to develop mindfulness is sitting meditation practice. Mindfulness training helps us to see thoughts as mental events. So rather than buying into our concepts and stories, when practising mindfulness we see thoughts as just thoughts. Traditionally we keep bringing our attention back to the breath to help stop us from over identifying with our thoughts. This leaves our mind free to register other mental events such as body sensations, emotions, sounds, impulses and visual input. Meanwhile our theories and preconceptions are still present but they take a more secondary place.

We can also miss novel stimuli such as those described in the constellation above by getting caught up in mindless repetitive patterns of behaviour that mindfulness practitioners refer to as “automatic pilot” (Segal et al 2002). “Automatic pilot” is a way of saying that we are acting without awareness of

what we are doing. While our body is doing one thing our mind is somewhere else. We all have a tendency to be on automatic pilot much of the time.

We enter automatic pilot when in doing mode. Doing mode gets us from point A to point B. While in doing mode there is always something to be done, something not quite right with the present situation that needs to be addressed. For example, I am thirsty so I go to the tap to fill a glass with water which I drink. This activity is driven by the discrepancy between what we want and what actually is. Much of the activity done on automatic pilot is well practiced: going to the tap, turning it on, filling the glass, lifting it to my mouth and drinking. As a result most of the mental processing in “doing” mode is unconsciously maintained as a mental habit in the back of the mind.

Both “doing” mode and automatic pilot are very important for our survival. It is impossible for most of us to be fully aware of so many activities at once. When a classical pianist has learned to play a complicated piece well, most of her finger movements operate under automatic pilot. That means more of her attention is freed to concentrate on interpretation and timing of the piece, the subtleties that give the piece emotional depth. It is because of this smoothness of automatic pilot that it is possible for any constellation practitioner to believe they are in a state of phenomenological flow when in fact they are just operating on automatic pilot. Often this flow can reflect increasing skill with systemic thinking which usually includes repetition of well rehearsed patterns.

However the automatic pilot can be inappropriately programmed. Cognitive distortions are one example of this. A facilitator of constellations can be so tuned in to adoptions as an entanglement because of his own adoption that he gives them too much weight in constellations and misses other important entanglements. Automatic pilot can also contribute to bad habits such as the facilitator who is unaware that his use of long sentences is depleting the constellation of energy but instead gets absorbed in the story they are creating in his own head.

Mindfulness brings us into “being mode”. The non judgemental acceptance of whatever arises in the mind means there is no discrepancy between what we are experiencing and what we want. This allows us to attend to what is happening right here and now without being distracted by planning the next move. It also allows us to attend in minute detail to that which has gone unnoticed before. Then we can choose a different response. Our mind can also reset the automatic responses to be more appropriate.

An example of this process is when a pianist has learned to play a piece incorrectly. In order to relearn the piece the pianist needs to slow her playing down enough so that she is no longer relying so much on automatic pilot to play the piece. She needs to reengage the attentional pathways originating in the prefrontal cortex. The pianist can then become much more mindful of the specific notes and the specific finger movements. This allows relearning to occur.

However while the new learning is occurring the automatic patterns of behaviour (e.g. the pianist’s finger movements) temporarily become less coordinated because they are being disrupted in the process of being reorganized. This discomfort, unfamiliarity and awkwardness are often what discourage people from experimenting with different behaviours in a mindful way. People can even protest “This is just not me”.

Similarly most constellation facilitators will be familiar with moments in constellations when they become completely lost. The rehearsed patterns and the theories no longer are helpful. In those moments the facilitator needs to let go of all striving, of all preconceptions and just be. In this moment of not knowing, of just being we can become more fully present, more mindful and therefore more phenomenological.

Moreover being so present without acting creates a holding energy that allows a space for a healing movement to emerge spontaneously from the field of the constellation. A facilitator needs to maintain similar ongoing deep presence to create a space for movements of the soul. Clearly it takes a great deal of practice and training to maintain this sort of open presence ongoingly.

People who practice mindfulness regularly change the way their brain functions. Within weeks of establishing a regular daily practice there is a measurable increase in blood flow to the left frontal lobe (Davidson et al 2003). After years of practice there is increased thickening of the cortex of the middle prefrontal regions of the brain and of the right insula (Lazar et al 2005).

Just as exercising muscle causes hypertrophy and strengthening, exercising particular areas of the brain increases the capacity of that area of the brain. The areas that are enhanced by mindfulness practice are involved in directing attention, modulating emotions, empathy and self-observation. These functions particularly help a person to hold emotions and to maintain an open awareness. These are crucial in effectively maintaining an open phenomenological stance. In my private practice I notice a significant increase in these faculties in patients when they engage a formal mindfulness

Daily practice of mindfulness allows us to train our attention to be more open and flexible. However it can be quite challenging to establish a regular practice. Finding time and sitting with unpleasant feelings such as agitation and boredom are issues that many find difficult. Rather than face these difficulties some say they already practice mindfulness or that they do not need to practise, as they are already mindful. Others say they practise other forms of meditation that are just as good. While other forms of meditation may be very helpful they are not likely to be such good training for the practice of phenomenology as they train concentration or relaxation rather than training an open awareness. Hopefully some readers will be sufficiently convinced that they will set about confronting these challenges. It is worth it to develop greater ease with sitting with the discomfort of not knowing and with the unpredictability of the unrehearsed.

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