

Mindfulness, Bodyfulness, Heartfulness

by Mike Morrell

“Try doing less, Mike.”

These four words are a frequent refrain I hear in Awareness Through Movement® class. I’m on the floor yet again. Usually followed by something like “What would it be like to be easier on yourself?” I then have the opportunity to move my arms, legs, head or torso more gently, lightly, or slowly than my previous, more amped-up pace. Next, I tend to notice something – about my body, thinking, or feeling – that I was previously powering through.

This marriage of ease and intention doesn’t come easily to me; I tend to be an all-or-nothing kind of person. I’m either sleeping, or giving it my all: writing, prospecting or serving clients, building community, interviewing someone or being interviewed, for a course or podcast. But as a Buddhist priest in the ManKind Project reminded me, and a group of equally-driven men, a few years back: “Anything worth doing is worth doing 70%.”

When did I become this way, so 0 to 95 MPH in 10 seconds or less? My memory goes back to my 10th birthday party. A few family, and a few friends were coming over, the same as previous years. There would be pizza and cake – a perfectly comfortable routine. But this was ten years old; it felt like a milestone. And so, I created a poster for my own birthday party, and hung it on the front door: “Celebrating a Decade of Excellence.” How, at ten years old, did I become my own hype-man?

Years later, forcibly slowed down by my own debilitating anxiety, I'd suddenly find myself with ample time to reflect on these and other questions; to pause, observe, and digest my own life. Memories surface: Writing and illustrating 'books' before I can even read coherently, myself; hyperventilating on a kiddie Ferris Wheel. Recapping years worth of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles storylines to patient relatives at Thanksgiving, full of verbosity and animation; having an earache so bad that I ask to say the "prayer of salvation" for my soul again, in case I die that night. My mind could take me to other dimensions; my body just weighed me down with limiting terrors.

And so I come to this Feldenkrais mat. Amid a life where my readers, my clients, and even my loved ones and friends so frequently want me to do more, my teacher here wants me to do less – even to the point where it gets embarrassing. Like if my head would be a bit less strained with another pillow underneath, she'll run over and fetch me one, like some server at a restaurant! It feels so improper; she's the teacher of the whole class. But then my neck unclenches, and I notice something else.

I could locate my Feldenkrais-derived insights as part of our culture's growing fascination with mindfulness, that penchant to adapt an age-old aspect of Eastern transformative practice to offices and boardrooms across the West. There does seem to be a lot of wisdom, here: Can I halt my ceaseless inner chatter, to concentrate on a single point? My breath, say, or a mantra? In so doing, I might be able to calm down a little, experience clarity, and perhaps even that reach ill-defined but often-sought summit called enlightenment.

What a word. In the East, enlightenment refers to a dissolving of all thought, recognizing the impermanence of all things. In the West, the Enlightenment refers to an explosion of knowledge, a surplus of thought. Seemingly opposite ideas at play, yet both revolve around thought.

Since I started having panic attacks in my early twenties, I've sought to fine-tune, corral, and tame my thought life, pivoting from Eastern ("Drop the story you're telling yourself right now, it's 'making' you suffer. Let that thought go! Be in the nowww...") to Western ("Replace your faulty thoughts with these better thoughts. Let's hypnotize yourself...") modes of thought management.

All of which have left me thinking...or wishing to stop thinking. All of which have left me firmly embedded in the primacy of thought which has reigned unchallenged since my precocious, storytelling, hype-man youth.

But is mindfulness ever meant to exist on its own?

Poet and writer Dave O'Neal muses:

Mindfulness

Of all that knocks at deathless door,
The eightfold path.
It's number four.
There are truly seven more,
The noble eightfold path's the score.
Buddhists are thus wise to shout,
"They're not what we're all about!"
But it's getting much too late,
To say they're only one of eight.

Feldenkrais, like a robust Buddhism, suggests that there might be a wider context in which to practice awareness; that I might be more than a mind weighed down by a 'problem body' to be managed. Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984) himself wrote:

“Faulty posture always expresses the emotional stress that has been responsible for its formation. The most frequent and observable one is the stress of insecurity in its different aspects, such as hesitation, fear, doubt, apprehension, servility, unquestioning compliance—and their exact opposites.

This wasted effort shows that the person had to produce it in order to comply with what she felt was an absolute necessity. The faulty posture was the best way in which she could produce at the moment what she had directed herself to do. It was the best posture at that time—and it still is, if she has learned little since.

It is quite erroneous to think, as some posture teachers do, that all the people in the world are wrong and do not know how to use themselves. And it is totally incorrect to think that a bad alignment of the body is the cause of the ailments that accompany such configurations.”

When it comes to the tensions, disorientations, and anxieties that I experience, it does me no good – and is indeed quite cruel – to throw my body under the bus, so to speak, because it has this response or that to stressful (or even perfectly ‘normal’) stimuli. And it’s doubly damaging to keep pushing my body, like some overworked mule, even further when under duress.

It’s equally strange to expect my mind, already pretty active, to do double-duty and reign these sensations (and their accompanying emotions) in.

So what’s a body to do?

How about less?

Could be that slowing down and sinking in, becoming more intimate with what-is, is a key to first warmly accepting, and only then potentially shifting myself on the level of experience?

If so, then it's bodiliness and heartfulness, in addition to a generous mindfulness, that will get me there. And I can begin, right here on this Feldenkrais mat, by being easier on myself.

And if I begin here, where might this greater ease end up?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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