

INFUSING FEMINIST-CLINICAL SENSIBILITIES INTO TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST MEDITATION

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The authors felt moved to write this narrative so as to share with other practitioners and participants of mindfulness and meditation activities their evolving motivations, insights, experiences—and challenges—surrounding the facilitation of such a circle at their university campus. Vincenza is employed as the Diversity and Women's Issues Counselor at this institution, while Russ serves as an Assistant Professor of Psychology. Given that the authors' mindfulness and meditation circle unfolded as a dynamic process—through "doing" and through ensuing conversation between themselves, as well as with their circle participants—and because this process varied experientially for each individual, the authors render their ideas in the form of a series of reflections. They ultimately frame their perspectives within a fully collaborative vision that they deem Feminist-Buddhist.

Vincenza...

When my good friend and colleague Russ approached me about co-facilitating a meditation circle within our university setting, my initial reaction was a sort of queasiness emanating from the pit of my stomach. While he certainly never represented himself as such, to my mind Russ was an experienced meditational devotee, who had frequented retreats and even studied with a seasoned guru whose exotic name I struggled to pronounce (let alone remember). I, on the other hand, was a sort of meditational dilettante, a meditation school dropout, if you will, who'd previously fled from two such groups in utter exasperation and despair. "Think about it," he said hopefully and encouragingly. "I will," I replied, stomach still churning, my interest nonetheless piqued.

Russ and I had first become acquainted when he visited me at the University Counseling Center where I am employed, seeking a guest presenter for his Abnormal Psychology class. We quickly discovered our similar perspectives, approaches, and interests linking contemporary psychology with alternative forms of spirituality, and we seemed to share a genuine rapport. Russ understood my intrigue with the concept of *mindfulness*, which permeates my work as a relationally oriented psychotherapist who strives, above all, to be emotionally and spiritually present with clients in the face of their flurry of often discordant feelings. Even more importantly, my colleague seemed to embody my belief in the value of "simply" being in the

present moment gently and without judgment: the veritable semantic cornerstone of mindfulness (Hanh, 1991).

Embracing the challenge, I shared with Russ my vision of the circle as a sort of sacred space wherein students and staff alike could gather to engage mindfully with themselves and each other. As co-facilitators, we would provide simple suggestions to direct participants' attention to their inner rhythms and sensory perceptions, with the intention of "resting" the conscious mind from some of its worries and woes (albeit temporarily). We would employ various supportive mindfulness-based techniques including deep breathing, walking meditation, and focusing activities such as observing a sacred object or tuning into meditation music. I imagined an informal and welcoming feel to our assembly, with no "right" or "wrong" way to breathe, sit, walk—or feel. While I certainly was not picturing ours as a therapy group, I did envision some time structured in for processing verbally participants' reactions to the practice of mindfulness and meditation.

In fact, I innately sensed that the latter practice, meditation, might be challenging for many of our members—an assumption that admittedly proved itself valid as the group evolved. As such, I suggested that we engage participants gently and gradually in the practice of breathing and sitting still, initially not extending our "quiet" intervals beyond five minutes per exercise, then slowly building to

longer stretches as comfort levels were allowed to grow. I connected with psychotherapist Charlotte Kasl's (2001, p. 85) incisive contention that "sitting meditation, over a long period of time, *can* help us become observers of our mind and slow down our reactions. But it's *not the only way* (emphasis added). Stillness and quiet and being completely present in the moment *is* meditation."

My motivation in seeking to curtail our initial sit time was two-fold: personal/emotional/experiential on the one hand, and professional/clinical/feminist on the other. Permit me to explain, beginning with the first of my intentions. I shared earlier my own spiritual nose dive from two previous meditation circles (both, incidentally, led by men). In fact, these groups had left me feeling insecure and incompetent, as the facilitators' reigning expectations seemed to be that meditation was some hallowed and esoteric practice for which only the spiritually pure and enlightened (i.e., those who were sufficiently disciplined and privy to precise technique) were destined. I begged to differ, but my questions (when I felt brave enough to even ask them) were met with seeming skepticism, accompanied by an unspoken espousal of the old adage, "no pain, no gain."

My other intention in moderating our meditational stretches might be deemed professional/clinical/feminist. My institutional role is, after all, to serve as a practicing psychotherapist who works with a primarily female population. Many of my clients also happen to be first-generation non-traditional students (i.e., age twenty-five years or older at our university) with tumultuous family lives for which they appear primarily responsible. As well, I am acutely aware that the majority of these women struggle masterfully with notions of self-nurturing, given their internalization of our culture's patriarchal gender norms and roles, which deem females our relational caretakers (Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1991). To my feminist eyes, to expect at the outset that these already overextended individuals devote an excess of five minutes to themselves at any given time (outside of therapy, which they adroitly appeared able to

justify on "mental health" grounds) seemed tantamount to psychotherapeutic treason! I'd argue that what legendary feminist author Virginia Woolf (1991) once asserted of the writing process likewise applies to meditation practice: metaphorically speaking, "a room of one's own" is enormously enabling—"as is," I would add, "the personal permission to use it!"

Furthermore, many of my clients have been emotionally, physically, and/or sexually assaulted and/or abused, and most suffer the psychological and physiological after effects of such trauma (Rothschild, 2000), often carrying diagnoses of generalized anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For these clients, so-called salvation frequently lies in shattering the familial and societal silence surrounding their trauma, and thus, giving voice to their heretofore "secret" experiences (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990). Sitting silently with their own often overwhelming feelings, and bodily sensations, thus might well serve a re-traumatizing function for such women, particularly if they were to be directed to do so by a male co-facilitator! As such, I had deep-seated reservations around asking said clients—many of whom I believed could benefit tremendously from tuning into their own inner vibrations—to tug too harshly at their comfort boundaries. Would it not be wiser to simply wheedle those walls down by increasing our sit time gradually, over the course of an entire semester and onwards? My attempts at integrating mindfulness-based exercises into my therapeutic work supported these contentions, in that clients repeatedly expressed a preference for briefer activities, accompanied by a subsequent opportunity to process verbally their inner experiences.

Of course, ethical consideration also had to be made of the overlapping nature of professional relationships within this context. In other words, could I legitimately hope to serve as both a therapist and a circle facilitator for certain students, given the inherent potential for creating divided loyalties within the group? At the very least, my clients, with whom I tend to work quite closely therapeutically, might favor my facilitation approach over Russ'. A similar argument could be made surrounding

Russ' potential dual position as both educator and circle facilitator, should any of the students within his classes wish to become group members. Given Russ' evaluatory power over his classes, some students might choose to attend our circle merely to incur favor with their instructor. Perhaps more importantly still, we would need to take special care to protect the confidentiality of my clients while within the circle. Russ and I discussed these concerns a priori and came to the conclusion that we would conference individually with affected students to process these issues. We would subsequently assess, on a case-by-case basis, the potential for positives and negatives surrounding circle participation. Our care in anticipating possible issues and challenges likely explains the relative absence of actual problems encountered regarding the overlying nature of professional connections.

As I'd suggested earlier, my own views surrounding meditation could be deemed at least somewhat alternative: and downright feminist. Indeed, my thinking has long been permeated by the pioneering work of feminist scholars and clinicians at the acclaimed Stone Center at Wellesley College (e.g., Jordan, 1991, 1997; Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997), who embrace notions of therapeutic empathy, and of "joining with" clients at every point of their psychological process. Of course, traditional oversight of the exigencies of many women's everyday lives (respectfully) begs the question of whether it is any real coincidence that so many of our culture's cherished gurus of meditation—from Thich Nhat Hanh to Ken Wilbur to Jon Kabat-Zinn—are men!

Not unexpectedly, my perceptions struck a chord of surprise in even my feminist-friendly co-facilitator—at least initially. In fact, Russ had enjoyed primarily positive experiences within a traditional meditational milieu. And despite his extensive clinical training and solid related experience, he is, after all, currently employed as an educator, and as such tends to be more performance focused and goal oriented than I generally am. In fact, I typically heard more from Russ about challenging members as learners than about supporting their inner experiences! Could this

in part be a product of his position as a tenure-track assistant professor within our institution, who thereby faces job-related publication pressures surrounding "serious" scholarly work, as we later came to consider?

As we moved through our first session, I found the feminist therapist in me surreptitiously scanning the fourteen other faces peopling the room (an encouraging mix of women and men of varying ages and statuses within the university). And swiftly, I noticed feeling frustrated and anxious that said participants might feel, well...frustrated and anxious! Our rather strained attempts at some mid-session verbal processing gave a certain credence to my suspicions for the majority of members, most of whom remained quite quiet, and a number of whom sported the proverbial "deer-in-headlights" look with which I was all too familiar, given my chosen profession. Despite our expressed emphasis on letting go of self-judgment, several clients sheepishly admitted to struggling with "staying focused," "getting it right," and/or "being good enough." I subsequently received additional confirmatory feedback from a few members who approached me outside of sessions, one of whom (in fact, a female client of mine) heatedly exclaimed, before exiting the group for good: "I *don't want* to sit with myself!" Hence, for most folks, this "meditation thing" was altogether new. And for some, it felt downright freaky!

Admittedly, Russ didn't seem quite convinced of my observations, and he even believed that we could steadily continue to tack additional time onto our activities. This, of course, sent me into a bit of an emotional tailspin, and I found myself wondering whether our respective visions for the circle were simply too disparate—reactions which I subsequently shared with Russ. Fortunately, however, Russ, with his underlying open-minded disposition (which likely, too, has been primed by his own longstanding practice of meditation), didn't panic along with me. Instead, like a good feminist, he worked to become increasingly sensitive to—or, as any self-respecting Buddhist, more mindful of—the kinds of cues that I'd been picking up on among circle participants from the start.



Russ' relative calmness and trust in our collective contributions (namely, my feminist clinical insight coupled with his own skill and experience in meditation and his educator's stance) and collaborative process provided safety and support for my feelings. Feminist scholar and psychotherapist Janet Surrey (1991, p. 172), also of the acclaimed Stone Center, deems as "relational empowerment" this sort of mystical "joining of visions and voices [which] creates something new," such that "participants feel enlarged." Russ' increasingly receptive, dare I say "feminist" energy definitely had such an empowering effect upon me! And so we continued to cycle, as did our little circle...

Russ...

As I look back over my personal experiences with education, the last two years of graduate school stand out, as I was challenged via some particularly unconventional venues. While pursuing traditional coursework, teaching, research, and assessment and therapy, I also chose to enroll in two alternative classes, one in experiential meditation, and the other in yoga. Although I was raised Roman Catholic and had been active in my church for many years, it was only when I began practicing these latter disciplines that I experienced a true sense of "flow" in both work and play (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For the first time in my life, I felt centered and in touch with the innermost parts of myself. I learned that I could be earthy and practical, as well as heady and deep. Memories of that unique experience—albeit itself temporary—have stayed with me ever since!

More recently, as a new tenure-track assistant professor attempting to find his niche in providing service to the institution, I faced an administrative mandate to engage in some form of applied learning—a focus at our university. Given my own earlier experiences, I knew that I wanted this process to be deeply meaningful for all involved. As such, I set out to create a calming yet eye-opening environment for students and others on campus in which to learn and to grow. I envisioned shaping a safe space wherein participants could *experience* life through their senses and

expand in ways other than merely intellectually, or "in their heads." I hoped that members might discover more about the practice of mindfulness and meditation along the way while gaining spiritual support from a community of like-minded others. Perhaps most of all, I wanted for participants to experience a similar sense of balance, equanimity, and centeredness to what I'd realized so powerfully for that brief time during my graduate school days.

Beyond such ostensibly deep and lofty goals, from a more practical cognitive-behavioral perspective, I knew that mindfulness and meditation practice could enhance attentional abilities, aid in systemic relaxation, and attenuate the effects of life stress (Shapiro & Giber, 1978)—all of which clearly would make for invaluable adjuncts within a campus milieu. Like Vincenza, I sensed the importance of "starting small," of meeting members where they were "at" emotionally and spiritually. We would begin by utilizing relatively short and varied mindfulness exercises while providing a nonjudgmental atmosphere and normalizing potential struggles around meditation among new learners.

In apparent contrast with Vincenza's initial assessment, I believed that our circle enjoyed an auspicious beginning, as we had managed to mobilize a good fifteen members (including ourselves)! While some participants admittedly seemed more interested and engaged than others, and while most members remained relatively quiet during the periods of our sessions devoted to discussion, no one, to my eyes, appeared to be experiencing overwhelming difficulty. Admittedly, some individuals disclosed a degree of physical discomfort, and still others found themselves confronting the juggernaut of self-judgment. Yet, I saw these struggles as part of the adjustment process in the face of learning a new practice and participants' silence as ordinary shyness in meeting a plethora of new people. Furthermore, I believed that Vincenza may have been selectively abstracting a few slightly uncomfortable reactions to the group as a whole. Given her position as a therapist, Vincenza's focus on struggling members seemed unsurprising. I also believed

wholeheartedly in our participants' inherent capacity to find a place of stillness and quietude from within. Hence, from my earliest vantage point, Vincenza and I actually appeared to be fairly in sync vis-à-vis our philosophical and practical stances!

Unfortunately, however, as the weeks advanced, our group began to encounter some additional challenges. Clear cause for concern became evident in the circle's slowly sagging attendance rates, which had decreased by at least one half. As well, member turnover from week to week made it that much more difficult to assess our group's ongoing level of progress. At around this time, Vincenza again expressed her lingering sense that certain members were feeling, at the very least, somewhat uncomfortable, and at times downright overwhelmed, by any expectation surrounding more concentrated focusing. I, on the other hand, believed that Vincenza likely was projecting some of her personal and professional expectations and experiences onto our circle participants.

Furthermore, I became increasingly concerned that if we continued along as we had been doing it would only serve to stall the group's ultimate progress. I knew how easy it was to become attached to learning something new, and I wanted members to experience the powerful impact of actually silencing the mind (Kornfield, 1993). I believed that too many different forms of mindfulness exercises for shorter time periods would only feed the "hunger of the crazy monkey in the jungle" (my favorite Buddhist metaphor for the constantly thinking, ever craving mind). In fact, the positive effects that I'd experienced from meditation came only after the peaceful practice of quietude! Sound Buddhist? I was trying to be! [I kept hearing this voice in the back of my head putting a new spin on a popular Evangelical Christian saying: "What would my sensei do?"]

At this point in our meetings, I became aware that Vincenza and I seemed to be slipping into certain distinct roles as co-facilitators. While Vincenza appeared to be more supportive and attuned to issues of group process, I—still enthusiastically focused on my objectives of fostering balance, equanimity, and

centeredness—wanted increasingly to challenge our circle participants. Simultaneously, however, I noticed myself feeling more and more disconnected from the group, as well as quite self-conscious. At times, I would say that I felt a little like a Buddhist in a cage at the local zoo, primed for gawking at by other members. I also noticed myself feeling rather discomfitingly like the "bad parent," whose more challenging stance contrasted rather starkly with Vincenza's softer posture.

Considering Vincenza's and my respective positions at the university, it seemed—at least in retrospect—unsurprising that we had fallen into these disparate roles. Vincenza, as a feminist therapist, is more concerned with attending empathically to individual experience. Her job classification as a professional staff person likewise affords her greater flexibility to focus on issues of group process. Alternatively, feeling pressure to produce within a tenure-track faculty position, I was noticeably more results oriented and alerted to what I believed were the goals of our group. Additionally, as an educator, I am expected to challenge my audience. Although empathic attunement and support provision are valuable in teaching, I nonetheless found myself demanding more and attending to experience less as an educator. As a teacher, I am also more self-focused, taking care to continually assess my clarity of communication and my ability to capture students' attention with my presentation. As a young educator, I realize that I may err on the side of overemphasizing self-perspective, given my desire to be clear and captivating.

As I struggled with my emerging sense of disconnect, it came to me that if I, as our circle's co-facilitator, was feeling awkward, had we erred in shaping that empowering safe space wherein members could thrive? I sensed my mounting need to challenge myself by trying on some new ways of seeing and being. In fact, increasingly, I came to wonder whether Vincenza might indeed be correct in her assessment of the group's need for more pacing in their progress. I also experienced mounting doubts about my capacity to co-facilitate the circle. As I listened to Vincenza,

now (as she explained it) playing the role of the “mother bear protecting [her] cubs,” I knew that we could really go places with her thinking. She was sure of herself, she was energized; and she made sense!

I also noticed myself trusting increasingly in Vincenza’s clinical intuition and skill, especially as she was working therapeutically with several of our members (who had actually expressed their concerns to her in private). Compassion filled me as I finally was able to empathize with those members who were struggling! I’d always intended to be more inclusive and hadn’t meant to alienate individuals who were already juggling intensely stressful lives. Nor did I wish for any members to turn away in frustration, anxiety, disappointment, or self-doubt from what I knew could be a healing practice.

Now in order to fully “hear” Vincenza, I had to let go of my original objections and preconceptions surrounding the pace of participants’ progression as most of our members were relative newcomers to the world of meditation. Instead of sitting or walking in contemplative silence for twenty or thirty minutes on end, we could simply “be” with ourselves for five or ten minutes for as many weeks as were necessary (particularly given the degree of group turnover) while gazing at a candle flame or listening to soothing music or to Vincenza’s soft voice guiding us through a visualization activity. This was a tough transition, as it necessitated not only evolving my vision of the group; it demanded swallowing my admitted pride by acknowledging that some members were struggling more than I had anticipated. And here I was, in a meditation circle!

Against a Buddhist backdrop (e.g., Kornfield, 1993), the irony of my insistence hit me like a hammer upside the head: “*Russ: these are attachments, let them go! Be aware, and show loving-kindness!*” I nonetheless realized that I’d fulfilled a deep-seated personal hope in co-sponsoring this circle in the first place: finding individuals who would help me to grow, thus enhancing *my own* sense of mindfulness and compassion. Vincenza and our circle participants were doing just that—especially since group members

were slowly becoming increasingly vocal around their relative likes and dislikes vis-à-vis practice! My experience of our respective roles within the circle shifted powerfully at this point as Vincenza and I no longer seemed to represent a series of distinctly different dualities: good parent/bad parent, supporter/challenger, therapist/educator. Instead we *each* could begin to embody and own both sides of these seeming pairs of opposites!

Furthermore, I noticed myself resonating increasingly with Vincenza’s—and, apparently (as I allowed myself to tune in more deeply), with our circle participants’—preference for the more encompassing notion of mindfulness over meditation. I’d previously been perceiving meditation from a somewhat purist point of view as a structured process that, with practice, could lead to enhanced spiritual enlightenment, or continuous awareness in life, or perhaps simply everyday mindfulness. What I needed assistance in remembering, from Vincenza—and from our other group members (once I could truly hear them)—was that mindfulness, the spirit that nourishes meditation practice, might also be attained directly, without structure! Instead of setting aside a particular place to meditate for long stretches, we could be mindful at any given moment of the day: of our own thoughts, a bird’s chirping, a tree in blossom, or a felt emotion. A burden was lifted from my then weary shoulders, thus freeing me to open myself more fully to the group experience. My performance as co-facilitator likewise flourished, as I rediscovered anew that awesome sense of flow that I’d first encountered some years ago.

Vincenza AND Russ...

As we continued to evolve as co-facilitators, so, too, did our cherished circle, which ultimately (by the semester’s end) boasted a steady membership of at least six committed participants—no small feat within the context of an often transient and fast-paced college community! Increasing emotional investment also was evidenced among our members. For instance, one participant purchased her own meditation mat and pillow, while yet another brought in a relaxation CD

for our listening pleasure, and still a third offered a candle for collective focusing. As well, most of our membership reported a heightened ability to focus with ongoing practice and upon discovering varying mindfulness techniques that worked well for them (for example, being one with the beauty of nature during walking meditations, or tuning into soothing music while sitting).

Several participants apparently especially enjoyed our guided visualization exercises, which they reported enabled their otherwise restless minds to hone into healing imagery. As one group member articulated her experience: "When I listen to you guys... you have these really soothing voices...reading through one of those visualizations—especially the ones involving nature—I can really see the peaceful imagery and feel it surrounding me, in a sort of blanket of calmness." In fact, participants increasingly expressed feeling peaceful within our little circle, a sensation that they reportedly eagerly anticipated during their frequently frenetic weeks in-between sessions. As one staff member articulated her experience: "I feel more relaxed just knowing I'm coming here!"

A spirit of carryover into members' everyday lives also became evident in some, who acknowledged attending more closely to the sights, sounds, and smells of nature while outdoors or simply slowing down and breathing deeply during times of heightened stress. One young man, who previously admitted to "wolfing down [his] food with a vengeance," noted "slowing down and really enjoying it!" We also witnessed the heartfelt generosity—particularly on the part of more experienced members—in sharing their considerable insight and helpful focusing strategies with their less seasoned peers. For example, one woman extolled the value of "really listening to [her] breathing," while another deemed "counting breaths helpful." Still another advocated "closing [her] eyes to shut out distractions and tune in." Hence, not only did our sessions continue to feel calming and meaningful; we also were shaping a supportive little community whose members indeed shared an enlarged sense of emotional and spiritual connectedness. Upon celebrating our end-of-

the-semester progress with a picnic in a local park, members mindfully shared savory strawberries and excitedly made plans to meet again next term.

As co-facilitators, we observed that continuing collective reflection upon our circle's evolution enabled us to become increasingly appreciative of the paradigmatic and practical differences between ourselves. While Russ had approached the circle as a skilled educator and seasoned practitioner of meditation as it's more traditionally been conceived, contributing relevant techniques and the theory behind them, Vincenza's expertise emanated from her clinical understanding and practice, privileging notions of empathy and "joining with" individuals at every point of their personal and collective processes. Vincenza is an ardent feminist, while Russ leans more towards Buddhist ways of being. Together, we complemented each other and seemingly succeeded in connecting with a broader range of participants than either of us might have reached on our own!

Russ earlier described an additional underlying structural dimension of difference between our respective roles within our university context, which we believe also shaped our corresponding divergent approaches as co-facilitators. Namely, Russ is a tenure-track assistant professor who faces considerable institutional pressure to publish scholarly research, while Vincenza, a staff professional, possesses greater luxury surrounding such "publish-or-perish" mandates and thus is freed up to focus on issues of group process. Therefore, Russ experienced a more pressing imperative to take the lead in initiating our circle, to enlist Vincenza as a collaborator, and to attempt to document so-called "real" and "recognizable" research "results," for example, as might be evidenced in participants' skill in more "serious" meditation practice within the circle. While also a highly educated professional, Vincenza's motivation to write and publish her scholarly work is more internally imposed—although her inner writer's muse remains remarkably vocal, and she did, in fact, both propose our paper's topic and volunteer to serve as first author!

In the end, we came to embrace our diverse ways of seeing and being, ultimately melding a unique amalgamation of Buddhism and feminism that, ironically, assisted each of us—accompanied by our always sage and increasingly skilled circle participants—in expanding our personal and collective capacity for experiencing everyday mindfulness and compassion: clearly core values of *both approaches!* We all became, in a very real way, Feminist Buddhists, in the wise words of Charlotte Kasl (2001, p. 88) more deeply appreciative that “Whether we are sitting, drinking tea, watching the sunrise, doing yoga, digging in a garden, or playing the piano, ultimately all that matters is to be in that river of spirit that frees us to bring a silent, living, breathing presence to all [that] we do.”

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