

Stillness, the Contemplative, and Creativity.

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ABSTRACT

Writing here, in a journal of silence studies, strangely, however thankfully, silence appears to be a mental abstraction. For me, an experience of silence signals an absence of life. Is there not inevitably some thought arising in the mind? Such inner verbalisation is hardly an experience of silence. Beyond arising thought, at the least, are there not birds singing, or trees whispering and creaking, or the wind sighing? Perhaps, 'stillness' better signifies a centring of beingness where moment-to-moment arisings of mind can readily be discerned. Potentially, stillness is the foundation enabling the contemplative to be knowable, available and potent. This paper describes: first, methods undertaken for establishing contemplative practice, in particular, founding the contemplative in embodiment as a human intrinsically interconnected with the natural living world; second, positive qualities of mind emergent within and supportive of contemplative practice; and third, the implications for nurturing the creative process.

Keywords: Stillness, Mindfulness, Contemplation, Creativity

Introduction

Within the contemplative tradition, silence is highly valued. When responding to the inquiry of another: "What have you been up to lately?", upon reporting I have recently returned from a contemplative retreat, a frequent follow up question is, "Was it a silent retreat?", the rider, "silent" implying a more serious or in-depth retreat.

However, as Ven. Tarchin Hearn suggests, silence brings the existence of life itself into question,

"Actually, if there is silence, the whole universe would have disappeared! If the retreat is in silence, we will all be in deep trouble. I expect the birds will continue to sing. The leaves will rustle in the breeze. Crickets and frogs will chorus with cicadas and the growing grasses and wildflowers. The cells of our bodies will continue to converse with each other. Organs will speak to organs. Intestinal fungi, flora and fauna will gossip and exchange news. Will there be silence? I sincerely hope not." (Hearn 2024, p. 1)

Often associated with silence, 'stillness' is potentially a more helpful concept to inspire, support and sustain contemplative practice. Stillness implies a calm, centred beingness where moment-to-moment arisings of mind, including sound, may readily be discerned. Stillness can be the location where the contemplative is available, knowable, and creatively potent. Stillness can be a centre where inquiry and the creative process is held lightly, in the vein of a muse or a pondering. Stillness is where we have sufficient calm, settledness and openness to recognise, consider and render arisings of mind. With stillness, we can explore arisings that deepen our understanding, nourish the creative act and our further inquiry, and discard those that do not.

Are you able to abide in stillness? For many novice practitioners of contemplation, initially, the answer is "No!". Their head is buzzing with myriad arising thoughts and their attention is jumping around going from one thought to the another. Stillness there is not. The commonality of

this initial practitioner experience is acknowledged widely in contemplative traditions. Most traditions offer novice practitioners a range of foundational exercises and practices to stabilise their experience and promote stillness of mind.

In this article, I describe an exploration of contemplative practice centred in stillness (calm, or *samatha* - Pali) with an ongoing group of between three and five practitioners meeting fortnightly over about twelve months. I was the facilitator and co-leader of the sessions with my partner. Within the group sessions, the overall research question explored was, "What are overall positive qualities of mind supportive of contemplative learning?" I followed up these sessions with my own daily personal contemplative practice sessions.

In exploring the qualities of 'mind' supportive of contemplative learning, of central consideration is the meaning of mind. According to Kalu Rinpoche, "mind is that which knows" (Hearn 2023, p. 147). Drawing upon this broad definition, a foundational proposition in this inquiry is that all arisings in awareness signal the presence of mind. It is evident through our direct awareness, consciousness or knowing of arising phenomena. These arisings include those coming through the five physical senses: smell, taste, sight, sound, and touch. They also include mental formations, for example, a thought in the form of an idea or a memory.

Confident of the presence of mind, having established stillness, it becomes possible to ask, "What qualities of mind supportive of contemplative learning are discernible in immediate experience?" Within our study, this inquiry was undertaken as an exercise in contemplative learning. Of immediate concern was the puzzle, how can I pause and abide with awareness of the moment-to-moment arisings in experience, or mind, and not be so distracted by tangential arising thoughts such that the thread of a contemplative inquiry is lost? Exploration of both the characteristics of an effective method for undertaking contemplative inquiry and qualities of the contemplative mind were the focus of this study.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design that collected data from iterative focus group sessions supplemented by autoethnography. Over a period of about twelve months, I explored cultivating contemplative practice in a two-hour session with a group of interested participants fortnightly followed up by my own contemplative sessions to further cultivate and deepen the understandings emergent from the group sessions. The focus group participants were not novice meditators. All had at least a few years experience engaging with the practices.

Two key questions guided these explorations:

- (1) "What are the central components of an effective method for undertaking contemplative inquiry?"
- (2) "What are the overall positive emergent qualities of mind associated with and supportive of contemplative inquiry?"

The two modes of exploration undertaken were:

- (i) with my partner, facilitating a two-hour session on cultivating contemplative practice with between three and five group participants sharing their immediate contemplative experience fortnightly;
- (ii) undertaking an almost daily session of contemplation at home that varied in length from about twenty minutes to fifty-five minutes.

We convened the focus group sessions in a dedicated contemplative space, often sunny, with large floor to ceiling windows overlooking over a timber deck partially shaded by a wisteria trellis onto the rampant greenery of an informal garden. The two-hour sessions commenced with five minutes of settling on comfortable cushions and mats provided followed by a short Refuge Prayer (Hearn 2007, p. 6 & 2021, pp. 7 - 9). I then introduced a theme of exploration and inquiry and provided some background from the classical Buddhist teachings to support further contemplation. These themes included, for example, generosity, patience, loving kindness, centredness, openness, equanimity, interbeingness and mandala.

My partner then facilitated a guided mindfulness through movement session for fifty minutes further drawing on the theme of exploration. The mindfulness through movement session grounds the participants in awareness of the body alternating a detailed, explorative, contemplative scan of sensation in the body and resting contemplating the overall, wholistic quality of body-mind arising.

A partially guided twenty-to-thirty-minute group sitting meditation followed. This focused on the contemplative theme for the session anchored by the participant's overall positive wholistic quality of body-mind experienced in the movement work prior. The session concluded with ten-to-twenty minutes of participants sharing their arising experiences followed by a Sharing of the Merit (Hearn 2007, p. 14).

Mindfulness through movement is of central importance to this method of contemplative practice and exploring associated positive qualities of mind. Through these sessions, described in more detail below, myself, my partner and session participants directly experienced the emergent positive qualities of mind described in the findings. My own personal contemplative sessions enabled further opportunity to explore, cultivate, nurture and discover other positive qualities supportive of contemplative learning and inquiry.

Assumptions underpinning the methods.

The foundational assumptions and specific structural components of the contemplative methods outlined below originate in the classical texts of Buddhist teachings. These teachings are over two thousand years old (Buddhaghosa 1975, p. ix). Similarly, the oral tradition of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings has been handed down for centuries (Kalu Rinpoche 2015, p. 8). The Hwa Yen School of China was established in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. (Chang 1992, p. ix). The Buddhist canon also includes much commentary on the original teachings from practitioners across the centuries, scholarship that continues today. Venerable Tarchin Hearn, a contemporary Buddhist scholar and teacher inspired my engagement with contemplative practice and the explorations detailed here. Mindfulness through movement, another contemporary form of contemplative practice was developed and taught originally by Leander Kane (Wangapeka Educational Trust 2024).

Enlivening the Body

Within contemplative traditions globally, the heightening of body awareness through practices such as yoga, bodily prostration, Tai Chi, or dance is recognised as highly conducive to contemplative practice. Buddhist tradition describes four fundamental foundations of mindfulness, the first of which is *kayanupassana* (Pali) usually translated as "body awareness" (Namgyal Rinpoche 1992, p. 21). Whether the body is enlivened and energised by muscular stretching or a short session of vigorous exercise, the embodiment practice described below is

hugely enriched by undertaking physical movement as the first and foremost foundation of contemplative method.

Within the group sessions, the sitting practice was undertaken after a dedicated fifty minutes of mindfulness through movement practice. Mindfulness through movement practice is a contemplative practice alternating the following: first, periods of gentle movement with attention given to sensation associated with the mechanics of, and coordination of the muscular-skeletal system; second, lying with one's back on the floor further contemplating sensations in the body; third, periods of walking naturally and attending to the coordination of the muscular-skeletal system alternating with standing still observing in-detail arising body sensations. As a mindfulness through movement session progresses, the detailed attention given to sensations in the body is married with contemplation of the arising overall felt/sense of the body state and any associated positive quality mind state. Through this practice, direct bodily experience associated with positive mind ('body-mind') states becomes more conscious. Further, positive body-mind states are reinforced as accessible by muscular memory through repeated, alternate walking and standing.

Posture

I engaged my own explorations of contemplative practice described in this paper mostly in either a sitting posture on a chair or in a standing posture. Traditional contemplative postures described in classical Buddhist texts include sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. The participants in the group sitting sessions either sat on chairs or cross-legged on cushions and mats on the floor.

An underpinning assumption regarding posture is that in a similar way to how we respond to the body language of another person within one-to-one interaction, mind qualities discernible in awareness are subject to influences from patterned formations of our own bodily posture (see Osypiuk et al. 2018, p. 2). For example, downcast eyes can evoke a sense of shutting down, avoidance and withdrawal from engagement, from both the "inner" and "outer", in comparison to eyes held level with the horizon.

The traditional Buddhist teachings suggest that for contemplative practice, a well-grounded, symmetrical, upright posture is the optimum providing, respectively, a sense of security and solidity, balance, and conditions for greater alertness of mind circumventing any tendency to drowsiness (see Namgyal Rinpoche 1992: 15).

Conscious Contemplative Inquiry

Consciously, engaging with inquiry is fundamental to contemplative practice in the Buddhist tradition. Because the process of becoming skilful at contemplation is one of cultivation, for a novice practitioner, practice guidelines, for instance, regarding posture, often will arise initially as the focus of contemplative inquiry. For instance, the novice practitioner will likely contemplate questions, such as, "Is my posture symmetrical?", "Do I feel grounded?" or "Am I sitting upright?" By trial and error, through repeated practice, and therefore based upon their own, first-person, direct, comparative experience (rather than some imagined ideal from a source text), the practitioner will cultivate the ability to recognise unhelpful posture and adopt a more supportive posture.

The exploration of question in the Buddhist contemplative tradition is known as the practice of *vipassana* meaning "looking into" (Namgyal Rinpoche 2004: 98: note 3). However, fundamental

to *vipassana* practice is *samatha* practice, literally "grounded wholeness", however usually translated as "calm abiding". Within the tradition, it is recognised that without a foundation of calm abiding, illuminative *vipassana* practice is not possible. *Samatha* and *vipassana* are viewed as two sides of the same coin: each goes with the other, however *samatha* is primary. In the sense that a posture supportive of calm is foundational to *samatha* practice, conscious inquiry is foundational to the *vipassana* aspect of illuminative contemplation. Once the capacity to establish calm abiding is in place, the experienced practitioner can ponder and muse other threads of contemplative inquiry.

Ideally, a contemplative focus is clearly posed and lodged in awareness at the beginning of the session. The practitioner then establishes and abides in spacious, open awareness. As they abide, initially, spacious, open awareness may be experienced as foreground. When focused upon musings associated with the focus of specific contemplative inquiry, it can be experienced as background. Stillness: calm, grounded, centred, spacious, open awareness is the touchstone and foundation of this contemplative practice. Cultivation of the practice will include to-ing and fro-ing between moments of musing exploring the focus of the contemplative inquiry, and those of abiding in spacious open awareness.

Tarchin Hearn (2013) provides fertile inspiration for this practice:

Contemplating Deeply

*Sampling and savouring
weighing and evaluating
analysing and measuring
testing, tasting, teasing, and playing,
considering and experimenting
marrying and joining,
dancing and flowing and leaping and growing,
letting be and celebrating through,
contemplating these themes,
feeling them in your body,
observing them in others,
holding the theme, and then,
being quiet enough for it to speak to you in the felt/sense language
of your own direct experience.*

*Dwelling in a space of love,
tendrils of curiosity reaching forth in all directions,
we feel our way,
softening and sensitizing into the richness of community,
a living world within us, around us and through us.*

*Apprentices of wonderment and awe,
probing and questioning,
sampling and savouring
with calm abiding and vivid discernment together exquisitely intermeshed,
we touch our home,*

*this world,
of you and me and all of us together,
precious
beyond words.*

(Tarchin Hearn © 2013)

Embodiment with metta (loving kindness)

A foundational assumption underlying contemplative practice within the Buddhist tradition is the practitioner cultivating purposively, a tangible, overall felt-sense awareness of body. Central to establishing awareness of the body is *metta*, often translated as "loving kindness". Adopting this caring quality supports the continuum of interest and inquiry necessary to establish an overall felt/sense awareness of the body.

Having established a grounded, symmetrical, upright posture and purposively adopting a disposition of *metta*, the practitioner caringly, purposively, and interestedly, with attention to detail, feels into the body to detect the quality of sensation in each area. This exploration is supported by expanding *metta* from the heart centre with a concomitant wish for each area of the body to be well and happy, thereby imbuing the enquiry with less intensity and more kindness and softness (Buddhaghosa 1975, p. 323, para 11). Distinctions in experience of sensation are made by comparing areas on the left side and right side of the body mentally noting differences in temperature, vibrational intensity, or areal patterning.

After this detailed examination of the body, the practitioner abides consciously in the overall felt/sense of the body recognising it is both imbued and cocooned in a physical experience of *metta*. The physical experience of *metta* could manifest within awareness in various ways: in many instances it is often accompanied by a physical sense of warmth, easefulness, and a light sense of wellbeing.

First-person awareness

Further, regarding embodiment as foundation to contemplative practice in the Buddhist tradition, another assumption is for the practitioner to cultivate shifting their view of the body from a third-person perspective to a first-person perspective (Hearn 2023, p. 74). So, while in the beginning of a session, observing from a third-person perspective, a practitioner may experience sensation as "over there" in their right ankle, gradually a shift to a first-person perspective is cultivated and adopted, to a direct experience of 'being' the ankle experiencing sensation.

Mindfulness through movement practice: lying horizontal, resting safely on the floor with the body no longer countering gravity, provides an easily accessible foundation for relaxed physical calm, the fundamental foundation for mental calm. This supports the ability to systematically, with attention to detail, feel consciously into the direct experience of sensation in the body. The practice is of considerable help in cultivating first-person awareness.

As described above, after a detailed examination of specific areas of the body, the practitioner abides in a direct, first-person experience of the overall, felt/sense quality of the body and associated positive mind state and, if possible, names it. Experience of the phenomena of the overall felt/sense quality of the body and associated positive mind state can be distinguished conceptually by the practitioner not just as an experience of body, or of mind, but as an

experience of "body/mind". The experience of body is through the mind. The overall felt/sense mind quality is also a bodily phenomenon. Conceptualising these as experiences of body-mind lodges them in awareness as tangible, felt/sense physical experiences that are retrievable through "muscle memory". One cultivates these positive body-mind states by consciously pausing, grounding oneself in the body and recalling the felt/sense of these positive states in the midst of everyday life.

Spatial awareness with metta

Within the translations of Buddhist treatises about meditation and contemplation, significant emphasis is given to the notion of "concentration", a concept that is frequently associated with the Pali word *samadhi* (Nyantiloka 1980, p. 292). Definitions of *samadhi* include "one-pointedness of mind" (ibid: 289) or "the centring of consciousness . . . evenly (*samam*) and rightly (*samma*) on a single object" (Buddhaghosa 1975, p. 89). However, the "centring of consciousness" with the quality of *samma*, translated by Bhikku Nanamoli as "rightly" can also be understood as "fully" or "totally". According to Srkris (2024), "Pāli 'sammā' is derived from Sanskrit 'samyañc' and is an adjective meaning "complete; entire; total; whole; full; perfect" (see also Glasshof 2024).

Generally, concentration in vernacular Australian English is understood to mean focused concentration on one thing to the exclusion of everything else. This corresponds with understanding concentration as one-pointedness of mind. Consider one-pointed concentration as pin-pointed, for example, visualised as fine-pointed like the point of a drafting compass. As we contemplate, potentially, we can consider the possibility of expanding the point from being half a millimetre in diameter to perhaps one millimetre; to two millimetres; to five millimetres; and then ten millimetres, then one hundred millimetres; then to a metre in diameter. Then expanding that encompassed by our concentration to ten metres; to one hundred metres; to the extent of the neighbourhood; then to the extent of the region; and so, onwards to the extent of the totality of our awareness. Potentially, we can be focused and centred with first-person awareness as the 'totality' of our knowing - including sensory data and that of our imagination - in all directions.

Cultivation of such spatial awareness supportive of contemplative practice is achieved using our imagination (Buddhaghosa 1975, p. 335, para. 52; see Hearn 2023, p. 91 and pp. 169 - 170). Founded upon a balanced, grounded posture, on the chair or cushion where we are sitting, and an overall felt/sense of embodiment suffused with metta, in our imagination we expand our sense of space by extending our felt/sense awareness geographically to the actual horizon in front of us. We adopt imaginary x-ray vision and extend our seeing through the walls of the house and adjacent rooms, through their living human, animal, plant, and insect inhabitants and thence into the garden. Above ground through gardens of plants, trees, animals, insects, humans and through houses, cars, offices, schools, shops, and factories. When the landscape ascends, our x-ray vision extends underground through soil profiles, roots of plants, trees, mycorrhizal fungi, and microscopic lives of creatures inhabiting these realms; and, on the landscape's descent, our x-ray vision extends through valleys and across treetops. This exercise is informed by our existing geographic knowledge of the place we are practising, the neighbourhood locale, wider region, and our imagination.

Our imaginary x-ray vision is not simply a cognitive imaginary exercise. We supplement this imaginary journey to the geographic horizon directly in front of us by extending a felt/sense of *metta* radiating from the heart to all the livingness we encounter between us and the horizon directly in front. Within this imaginary exercise, as we wish all wondrous life forms that we

encounter along the way, "May you be well and happy"; we imagine they in turn emanate their own radiance that blesses us with loving kindness at the same time.

Once we have extended our spatial awareness as far as we can to the horizon directly in front of us, potentially to where we are aware of the curvature of the planet falling away beneath us, we come back and re-centre our awareness in the body, on the cushion, in this room, in this specific geographic location feeling the extent of the space in the direction we have just traversed in imagination.

We then repeat the exercise in five other directions, to the right, behind us, to the left, and then above and below.

Abiding in the spacious mandala of experience

Having established a felt/sense spatial awareness in the six directions imbued with *metta*, I sit in stillness, with a first-person experience of spaciousness. My awareness, my "knowing" or "mind", using Kalu Rinpoche's definition, is populated by moment-to-moment physically based sensory arisings and other mental formations, some in the form of thoughts, emergent from all directions. I am aware of a three-dimensional mandala of arisings whose extent is as vast as my imagination. In this way, the experience of one-pointedness can be open and spacious.

As the contemplative practitioner abides in the spacious mandala of experience, the focus of contemplative inquiry is again raised to awareness. The practitioner purposively considers, muses and rests in the flow of associated questions and thoughts. The 'train' of thought will include associated implications, considerations, and related questions. When the flow of investigation stumbles, or comes to halt, or goes off in a seemingly unproductive direction, the practitioner refocuses upon abiding in the spacious mandala of experience. When a thought again arises associated with the contemplative inquiry, the practitioner again gives the inquiry further consideration in the manner described by Tarchin Hearn in the *Contemplating Deeply* piece above. When the flow of investigation ceases to be productive, the practitioner resumes abiding in the spacious mandala of experience.

The back and forth between active investigation of that which is being contemplated and abiding in the spacious mandala of experience skilfully is the art of this method of contemplative practice. Clear discernment and knowledge of the distinction between when one is contemplating productively and when one's train of thought is unproductive or caught in distraction is developed with repeated practice. It is a knowing one can only have for oneself and based upon direct experience, is further cultivated and developed.

In many instances, students of contemplative practice understand the goal as the ability to abide without distraction which many understand to mean without thought. Such an approach to practice is an over-emphasis on the *samatha* or calm abiding to the point of shutting down arising mental formations rather than allowing their coming and going. Such a practice misses the *vipassana* aspect of contemplative practice, that of "looking into" and raising and abiding in inquiry purposively.

Findings

Founded upon establishing stillness, this study investigated supportive qualities of mind arising within contemplative practice. Within each session, having proceeded to establish abiding in the

spacious mandala of experience through the methods described above, the contemplative inquiry (in the focus group) focused upon, "What overall positive or supportive qualities of body-mind are present in awareness?" This was followed by participant's sharing their experiences, in particular, words describing emergent overall positive qualities of mind arising. I based my own individual practice on the same methods. All the qualities of mind described below emerged in the experience of myself and at least two other participants across the sessions.

Frequently, it was difficult for the participants (and me) to find a name for some overall positive qualities of body-mind present. Nevertheless, by feeling into these qualities and naming them, they became more accessible to consciousness and amenable to further contemplation. When resting in the overall felt/sense of an emergent positive quality, we explored other supportive qualities present that seemed to 'go' with the predominant overall positive quality. Key supportive qualities revealed by this approach to contemplative inquiry discerned by participants applying the methods above included peacefulness (stillness, calm), groundedness, centredness, softness, openness, spaciousness, connectedness, lightness (happiness, joy), and aliveness (energy, luminosity).

I suggest that these qualities are the foundation of contemplative inquiry and the "creative attitude" described by Fromm (1959). Potentially, they can be simply and easily incorporated into group learning and pedagogical approaches with diverse cohorts. Incorporated into student learning, they provide a powerful foundation for contemplative exploration in the Arts (music, theatre, dance, painting, cinema and more).

Groundedness

A strong sense of connection to the earth was a predominant quality of body-mind supportive of contemplative practice experience by both myself and the participants. The practice of purposively and actively exploring a specific line of inquiry, and then following musings or trains of thought productive to the exploration was not purely a mental exercise. Grounding oneself in the body and consciously referencing felt, body sensory arisings through the contemplative exploration ensured a sense of stability, connection to the living world and grounded responsiveness. My own awareness was of direct first-person experience through the senses, consciousness of being here in this place, now at this time and a tangible and secure sense of operating within a known frame of reference. I found this grounding provided an anchor point to which I could readily return if I found myself caught in an unproductive train of thought such as an imaginary flight of fantasy unrelated to the contemplative focus.

Centredness

Within this contemplative practice, I and other participants found that by having a sense of balance and being centred both physically and mentally provided a feeling of security and solidity. Accompanying this was a sense of strength, a feeling of confidence and greater purposefulness. I became more confident that I would not be easily swayed from my intended purpose.

Sitting in a specific room, in a particular geographical location, at the centre of a spacious open mandala of awareness experienced here and now in the first-person is a powerful unitive experience. Potentially, duality, the subject - object split, dissolves and one can abide in a direct experience of union (yoga). Such a standpoint is quite distinct from a standpoint of duality that most of us take for granted as given. Within a unitive standpoint, one realises one's being is

interconnected with all living beings and notions of "the environment" as separate to our own being become less sustainable.

Because our conditioned patterning, in general, is to dwell in duality, adoption of a unitive standpoint as described here requires cultivation. Importantly, its cultivation goes beyond sessions of dedicated contemplative practice to repeated moments of pausing and grounding oneself in the body in everyday situations. One pauses, invokes loving kindness, and draws upon bodily "muscle" memory to reconnect with the felt bodily sense supporting the positive qualities of mind experienced previously in more formal practice situations. One re-members oneself bodily into this unitive standpoint.

A key support for adopting a unitive standpoint is the work Maturana and Varela (1998) who demonstrate physiologically that we conjure the experience of our sensory world based upon our biological structure. Understanding the scientific basis of our individual and unique fabrication of sensory experience, I find, gives me increased impetus to cultivate and familiarise myself with the unitive standpoint and greater confidence in my own direct experience of the world.

Softness

By engaging in this contemplative practice, an overall positive quality of mind that consistently emerged for both participants and myself was a felt/sense of softness. Softness, in my experience, is such that everything I am encountering feels less removed and separate and more intimately connected with my beingness in a feeling sense. I felt less of a cognitive "in the head" connection with phenomena arising in awareness towards a more physical, felt-kinaesthetic connection, experienced overall as a softness.

Within the felt/sense of softness, I found a little less intensity, less hardness and brittleness within the contemplative practice. Alongside this softness, arose a sense of being able to "go with it" or an ability to "roll with the punches" in more vernacular language. Associated with this quality was more of a sense of flexibility or 'give' and less rigidity in beingness.

Open spaciousness

Cultivation of spatial awareness of loving kindness (*metta* Pali) in six directions using a felt/sense of imaginary x-ray vision as described above is a key method of this contemplative practice. Concomitant with abiding in the spatial experience of metta is the experience of abiding consciously in a sense of spaciousness, a fundamental supportive quality of mind for contemplative practice. Most participants reported an increased sense of spaciousness in their practice.

I and other participants found a quality of openness also present when the experience of spaciousness is imbued with metta. Within the practice, the practitioner maintains open spaciousness in the midst of a three-dimensional mandala or sphere of arisings in awareness by allowing them to arise and pass away, in similar way to the breath rising and falling. Some practitioners describe this state as "non-clinging awareness" (Namgyal Rinpoche 1992, p. 43). In the sense that one is not attaching one's sustained attention to any single phenomena arising in awareness to the exclusion of others, there seems to be sufficient space for all arisings to come and go.

Centring oneself in such vast open spaciousness, arising thoughts, particularly those in the form of 'worries', that previously may have been overwhelming, can become merely just another small arising amongst myriad presenting themselves. Along with a felt-sense of open spaciousness, may arise an acceptance of a wide-range of sensory and mental phenomena without any sense of compulsion to claim or reject anything. In Buddhist terminology such a state is called *upekkha*, often translated as equanimity.

Connectedness/non-separateness/interbeingness

By establishing both the radiance of metta from one's own heart centre in all directions and feeling the radiance of metta from all surrounding life forms in response, another supportive quality of mind arising is a feeling of supportive connection to all life. Focus group participants reported feeling a sense of connectedness with everything around them. In my own practice, I became aware that everything arising in mind through the physical senses is the result of the activity of life itself in all its myriad forms; and, that our own life is totally interdependent with all other life forms.

Non-separateness and intimate connectedness with all life is described by the late Vietnamese monk, Ven. Thich Nhat Hahn as the experience of interbeingness (Thich Nhat Hahn 2024). Thich Nhat Hahn suggests that actualising this as a foundational basis for action in the world rather than as just an intellectual concept is fundamental to *samma-ditthi*, the first step of the Noble Eight-Fold path in the Buddhist tradition (Thich Nhat Hahn 2005). *Samma-ditthi* is often translated as "right view." However, as indicated previously, *samma* may more also be understood as "full; complete; or total". *Samma-ditthi* can be understood as "totality view" grounded in a first-person experience of the spacious mandala of being.

Lightness/happiness/joy

Accompanying the other positive qualities of mind supportive of contemplative practice mentioned above, participants also report feeling a quality of lightness of being accompanied by a sense of happiness or joy. I also experienced the feeling of lightness of being. Aware that other participants reported a sense of joy or "feeling happy" along with this quality of lightness, I was prompted in my own contemplation to examine whether happiness and joy were present in my own experience. Interestingly, while I readily found a physical sense of joy experienced as a warmth and a light energetic sense of aliveness though the whole body, along with an easefulness of mind, it did not readily translate for me as happiness or joy. It was more a quality of evenness and lightness.

Aliveness/luminosity

Participants also reported a sense of being enlivened both as a physical experience of increased aliveness and awakened sensation throughout the body as well as a sense of increased mental acuity and responsiveness. In my own practice, I felt a spacious interbeingness with all life as a tangible vibrant sense of connection or what I would describe as a luminosity of being.

Discussion

In popular discourse, almost inevitably, contemplative practice implies the presence of silence and solitude. However, the realisation that each of us is inseparable from the environment we live within raises the question as to whether a natural silence is even possible. Likewise, solitude, being alone, implies separation, from both other humans and, potentially, nature (for example, in a monastic cloister or cell). However, we are never alone. We cannot step 'outside' interbeing. We are always in-relationship, interbeing with the living natural world. Potentially, there may be some distance between us and other human beings. However, getting totally away from other human beings is an increasingly rare circumstance within the densely populated and interconnected world of today.

It seems to me that "stillness" is a far more potent concept as an aspiration for creative, contemplative practice than either silence or solitude. Both silence and solitude imply a need to "get away from it all", to retreat from the daily goings-on of life to find peace and clear our minds. However, the skill of finding stillness, wherever we are, offers vastly more creative potential. Stillness, or settled calm, wedded with heartfelt loving kindness (*metta*), is known across the contemplative traditions of the planet as foundational to contemplative practice.

Within this study, the methods utilised have demonstrated how embodiment and 'muscle memory' are excellent supports for finding stillness in busyness. Stopping and pausing amid everyday activity was found in this study to be highly supportive of a more contemplative disposition: to pause, and "pour oneself into oneself". One can pause, contact stillness and purposively brighten awareness of the whole breathing body imbued with loving kindness. The Pause, Breathe, Smile program is an example of how this work is being taught to students in primary schools in New Zealand with highly positive results for student learning and general wellbeing (Rix & Bernay 2014, Devcich et al 2017, Rusk 2023).

Silence and solitude have persisted over centuries as concomitants of contemplative practice. It is helpful to make a distinction between formal training for contemplative practice and contemplative practice as a cultivated standpoint of being. As indicated previously above, in attempting to calm the mind, novice practitioners experience myriad arising thoughts with their attention jumping from one thought to the another. In terms of training, the contemplative traditions provide an array of foundational practices for "learning the scales" of contemplative practice. Silence, as refraining from conversation, and solitude, as avoiding interaction with others, are ways of enabling supportive circumstances to minimise distraction and unnecessary activation of mind. Setting up a training situation and minimising potential sensory distractions - sounds, sights, smells, tastes and textures - and conceptual stimulation is helpful. However, undue emphasis on "going into silence" or "getting away" may encourage practitioners to shut out arising mental formations and sensory experiences rather than enabling understanding they are, like everything else, impermanent phenomena that arise and pass away in conscious awareness.

In distinction to training for contemplative practice, contemplative practice as a standpoint in everyday life is cultivated through stillness - remembering to: first, pause in the midst of activity; second, reconnect with stillness and a foundation of calm (often supported by awareness of breath); and third, brighten loving kindness (often prompted by an inner smile). Renewed direct realisation of this foundation builds confidence for further engagement with the world.

Cultivation

Primary to the approach undertaken in this study is an understanding that the skill of contemplative practice centred in stillness and incorporating learning and inquiry requires ongoing practice. Support for contemplative practice requires 'on-the-job' refinement. Initially, as indicated above, much of the focus of a novice practitioner's contemplative inquiry will be upon setting up the practice in a supportive manner. Initially, practitioners engage contemplative inquiry with questions, such as, "Is my posture upright?"

Refinement is achieved through the practitioner's own first-person, direct experience. For example, an inner contemplative process could be, "When I sit this way, there is tension here". Then, after adjusting the posture, "When I adjust and sit this way, the tension is eased." There is a learning - a direct experience of knowing. One engages these contemplations, in the manner of Contemplating Deeply as described by Tarchin Hearn above, "Sampling and savouring . . . etc."

Cultivation through ongoing practice and the process of comparing first-person, direct experience in one moment with first-person direct experience in another moment is fundamental to this approach to contemplative practice. This applies whether the phenomena being compared are physical states, sensory data, mental formations, felt/sense qualities or overall mind qualities.

On the basis that one has a foundation of *metta* and thus heartfelt interest in the focus of contemplation (a narrative, poem, painting or composition) supported by a foundation of stillness and calm, the contemplative practice could also be described as the practice of a well-motivated, self-directed learner. One is valuing one's own first-person direct experience as valid in the moment of experience. And, subsequently comparing that experience to another moment of experiencing a similar phenomenon. One is learning for oneself based on comparative distinctions in experience.

Validating one's own direct experience in this way is an exercise in building self-confidence. One makes one's own distinctions based on one's own experience or, one's knowing. The contemplative practitioner realises their autonomy as an individual living being (see Maturana & Varela 1998: p. 47). At the same time, they know they are not separate from all other living beings. Still, they value and honour their own experience, their unique process of formation as a human being and thus their unique take on the world. This process is a healthy antidote to contemporary harms to mental health associated with the mystification of [personal] experience where one's direct experience is invalidated and self-confidence in one's unique take on the world is undermined (see Laing 1967, p. 1).

Central to building self-confidence within this approach to contemplative practice and self-directed learning is stillness and upon that basis cultivating a first-person, unitive standpoint. From this standpoint, one can realise direct experience. Being caught in the duality of the subject - object split externalises knowledge such that it can be viewed as beyond, or unattainable. As Maturana and Varela (1998: 29) observe, "everything known is known by someone". All research is undertaken by somebody somewhere. There is no "all-conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway 1991: 188). The fundamental shift in standpoint cultivated through the contemplative practice described here marks contemplative practice as a transformative pedagogy. Through the practice, one can see and meet the world anew.

Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of this approach to cultivating stillness, contemplative practice and learning described here may be transferable to other learning situations given suitable supportive structures. Within this study, I facilitated this approach to contemplative practice with a participant group of 'adult learners' within ongoing fortnightly, two-hour sessions across a good part of a year - four terms of between six and eight sessions. However, the essence of the practice is its cultivation and the processes of familiarisation and acclimatisation. Outside of the fortnightly group sessions, I committed myself to an almost daily practice session of between twenty and fifty-five minutes supplemented by pauses during the day. I found these individual sessions and practices enabled space for ongoing familiarisation with new mind qualities revealed in the group sessions and their consolidation in everyday experience. How often the other participants engaged individually in contemplative practice is unknown to me.

Group learning in the cultivation of stillness and contemplative practice is particularly valuable because sharing enables participants to develop a language together around the practice. When describing novel qualities of mind, often participants are grasping for words. While there is much discussed about physical health and its concomitants in popular discourse, there is far less about mind states and qualities of mind. Group exploration of arising qualities of mind arising within the contemplative practices described here prompted participants to find adequate descriptors of their experience. The commonality of that experience and its sharing had an enabling effect on building a supportive learning environment and the cohesion of the participant group. Furthermore, the sharing in the group included participants teaching each other through providing examples in shared language of their own contemplative process and the outcomes.

Developing stillness and contemplative practice within the Arts, provides a solid foundation and platform for confident self-expression and performance. As described above, contemplative practice, founded upon cultivating stillness and loving kindness (towards self and others as described within classical *metta* practice - see Buddhaghosa 197, p. 323, para. 8) amongst other qualities, imbues the practitioner with groundedness and a felt/sense of embodied interbeingness with the living natural world. Today, popular online discourse celebrates freakishness, tragedy, and drama in the lives of creatives and artists. Because such images saturate popular media, young and impressionable participants in the arts are susceptible. However, the contemplative practice described here is a way for any human being, including artists, to cultivate and experience a solid sense of groundedness, interbeingness and realisation of their own uniqueness and value its expression in the world. Equally importantly, these practices provide a fecund contemplative platform with openness and aliveness as a birthing ground for creative expression. By engaging with the contemplative practice as described here, potentially, artists can cultivate solid grounding and support to create unique, inspirational, and galvanising forms of artistic expression.

Groundedness, Interbeingness & Aliveness

Stillness and an embodied groundedness imbued with *metta* cultivated in the methods described in this paper are an essential foundation for contemplative inquiry and learning. Conscious caring connection through our body and a first-person, direct experience of our inseparable connection to the surrounding living world corporealizes a standpoint within which the natural living world becomes primary in all considerations of appropriate and ethical action. Recognition of the natural living world as of our own beingness and, through being the origin of endlessly diverse novel arisings in experience, our mother, brings the knowing of our Indigenous brothers and sisters of "I am the land" into direct experience. Such a fundamental shift in standpoint brings

into question numerous perceptions and views formed in the absence of this knowing and provides a powerful basis for advocacy of more wholesome relationships within and on the planet.

Experiencing stillness with a sense of groundedness and connectedness provides a sense of security that enables more openness. One can become more open to new ideas, sensory experience and physical activities. Such openness is a potent source of inspiration and a potential palette for new modes of self-expression. One has the necessary foundation to let go and liberate oneself from previously locked-in patterning, both physical and mental, and associated ways of viewing the world; patternings that previously may have restricted creative expression. The realisation that one's standpoint has its own validity, is unique to one's own being and a new offering to the world is another foundation for self-confident, creative artistic expression.

Likewise, the recognition of our connectedness to all others, realisation that the experience of being *is* relationship, and direct experience of the interbeingness of all life imbues one with a profound sense of appreciation of the sacredness of all life. The knowing that one is a part of a tradition of appreciation for the sacred and its many and varied expressions across the planet is another source of connection and inspiration. An ongoing interest and appreciation for the sacred is a doorway into many diverse global communities and cultural traditions and potentially a vehicle for further building the arts community across multiple ethnicities and cultures.

Together, stillness, groundedness and interbeingness result in a greater sense of aliveness, vitality, and happiness. Through ongoing cultivation of contemplative practice and increasing familiarisation and acclimatisation, the practitioner finds that previously arising unwholesome states arise less often. The wholesome positive qualities of mind increase their presence in awareness more often and as a result more energy is present and available along with an increase in creative potential.

Conclusion

Stillness, rather than silence and solitude, is integral to the contemplative practice described in this paper. Cultivated repeatedly over time, the practice enables the practitioner to engage in iterative first-person, direct comparative experiences of body and mind such that discernment of distinctions between these enables increased self-understanding. The methods, derived predominantly from the Buddhist tradition, provide a solid foundation and framework upon which one becomes more able to abide in spaciousness and the mandala of arisings and passings away therein. Increased familiarity of abiding this way, establishes a solid foundation and platform for the creative act. With stability and security, the contemplative practitioner is enabled to engage the creative process (a narrative, poem, painting, or composition), focus and discern between productive and unproductive trains of thought.

By repeatedly cultivating the methods of contemplative practice described here, increased awareness and responsiveness arises in being. According to Eric Fromm (1959), increased ability to be aware and to respond is the essence of the creative act,

“Every act of birth requires the courage to let go of something, to let go of the womb, to let go of the breast, to let go of the lap, to let go of the hand, to let go eventually of all certainties, and to rely upon only one thing: one’s own powers to be aware and to respond; that is, one’s own creativity. To be creative means to consider the whole process of life as a process of birth, and not to

take any stage life as the final stage. Most people die before they are fully born. Creativeness means to be born before one dies.”

Eric Fromm (1959, p. 53)

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