Brief Report

IFS and Mindfulness Meditation

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Abstract

Although the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model of psychotherapy and the tradition of Mindfulness Meditation (more traditionally called Vipassana) have strikingly different origins, these two practices possess several dimensions that are particularly complementary. Whether seen as separate vehicles for creating many of the same outcomes, or as ways to facilitate the work of the other, both can serve as powerful tools for healing and self-growth. Mindfulness meditation is a very effective tool for facilitating two important goals of IFS work - namely, creating balance within the internal system and promoting Self-leadership. At the same time, IFS work can serve an essential function in the path toward mindfulness by providing a mechanism for dealing with parts that prevent some people from being able to be present in the moment.

To fully understand the complementary nature of IFS and Mindfulness, it is first necessary to identify several key features of each of these methods for growth and healing. Central to the Internal Family Systems model is the concept that parts, or subpersonalities, exist within each of us, and that these parts can be worked with in ways that allow for our core Self to assume a leadership position. Such an arrangement is assumed to be desirable because the Self is capable of being consistently compassionate and non-judging. Without Self Leadership, conflict between our parts often leads to internal polarizations (e.g. a part of us may be pushing us to take on new challenges, while another prefers to leave things as they are). By helping such polarized parts to be less extreme, it is easier for the Self's qualities of compassion and non-judging to become evident, as those parts are not working so hard to protect the system from moving too far to the other end of the continuum.

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Additionally, the nature of the Self is such that it assumes a meta-perspective, thus avoiding getting caught up in moment-to-moment dramas. While parts of a person can be experiencing extreme thoughts, beliefs, and/or emotions, which distort perceptions and create suffering, the Self provides the capacity to step back and see a broader context, offering balanced, clear understanding.

Interestingly, the IFS model's descriptions of being in one's Self are remarkably similar to descriptions of the desired state of consciousness pursued in spiritual practices such as Mindfulness Meditation. However, as opposed to separating subpersonalities, the vehicle of mindfulness practice involves paying attention in a particular way to what is going on in the present moment.

To understand this practice it is helpful to consider the teachings of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, perhaps the world's foremost Mindfulness teacher (Nhat Hanh, 1996). He suggests the following meditation: "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in...Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out." Simply paying attention to the experience of inhaling and exhaling brings people to the present (as we can only breathe in the present). When the mind wanders, the practitioner gently, without judgment, brings it back to the breath. For example, as I feel the air go into my nostrils and down my throat, fully experiencing the sensations of the breath, my mind will eventually wander elsewhere. If I were to begin thinking about getting something done at work, I might then simply label that experience (e.g. "planning" or "thinking") and then go back to breathing in and out. Whatever the experience - thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, etc., the practice involves noticing it without judgment and then returning to the breath (or other points of focus).

Although this practice appears to be very simple, it can be challenging to alter habitual patterns of the mind dwelling in the past or future. The more one can live in the present moment, however, the less likely he or she will experience the suffering, which occurs from worrying about the future or being stuck in the past. Also, the more one can be present to what is actually happening in the moment, to be in touch with what is

really real, the more likely he or she will enjoy an experience of connection which is very rich and fulfilling. This quality of presence resembles that of being in one's Self, or establishing a state of Self leadership described in the IFS model.

Thus, practicing Mindfulness can be not only healing, but also serve to facilitate IFS work. Coming back to the present moment is, in essence, elevating the Self to a position of leadership. This occurs for several reasons. To begin with, unlike parts, which may be preoccupied with the past and future, the Self resides in the present. This is not to say that one cannot think about the past or plan for the future while in the Self, but that the very state of awareness that characterizes the Self is one that is always grounded in the here and now. Therefore, to bring attention totally to the present, is in many ways synonymous with bringing one into a state of Self leadership. Also, mindfulness practice typically develops a greater capacity to respond to whatever is happening (compulsive thoughts, fear, anger, boredom, joy, etc.), with a quality of mind, which is non-judging. Again, this description is one, which also characterizes qualities of Self-leadership.

In the same way that mindfulness practice can cultivate states of mind which allow easier access to IFS work, "parts work" can facilitate, and may even be a necessary predecessor to mindfulness practice. If a person has a part, which is extreme, he or she may find little interest in practicing mindfulness because it is too challenging. To illustrate, a man could have an anxious part, which creates racing thoughts. In addition to the mind being so active that it is difficult to stay focused on one thing such as the breath, he will most likely have a part, which judges him for having the racing thoughts. In this situation, it would be wise to work with these parts until they are less extreme. Specifically, it would be helpful to discover how the part maintaining racing thoughts is protective in some way. For example, racing thoughts may protect the person from experiencing extremely vulnerable parts, which have been pushed away.

The tendency to distance ourselves from aspects of us that are difficult to face, presents another area, although conceptually described differently, in which IFS and mindfulness share common ground. Mindfulness teaches that it is the nature of the mind to either push experiences away because they don't feel good, or grasp too tightly to experiences that are pleasurable. The mindfulness practitioner works toward neither pushing away nor grasping experience, but to be present with it. This is not unlike a description of the relationship between the Self and a harmonious system of parts. Systems function less effectively when parts tend toward too much blending with the Self, or toward being pushed away too far (being exiled). In this way, mindfulness meditation and IFS work both *serve* to facilitate an awareness which is capable of being present with aspects of ourselves without becoming overwhelmed by them. We come to know that we have anger, sadness, and confusion, greed, etc., but at our core, we are not those things.

Another quality of Self, which is cultivated by both mindfulness practice and IFS is that of curiosity. When a person is in a state of Self leadership, there is typically a sense of curiosity about various aspects of the internal system. Likewise, when practicing mindfulness, one is advised to notice experience with a sense of openness and fascination. It is, in essence, to be stepping back and asking questions such as, "Isn't that interesting that I'm feeling anger right now. I wonder what that's all about?" Asking these questions is not about actually finding answers. It is to be open to possibilities, and in IFS terms, to be separate from the part. This state of awareness is sometimes referred to as "beginner's mind." In this state, one has the capacity to see things as a child, as if for the first time, with a sense of awe and wonder.

A final similarity of great importance to both IFS and Mindfulness is that they are each strongly embedded in a systems model. With IFS, there is the understanding that if one part changes, it will inevitably affect other parts within the system. Likewise, the concept of interbeing in mindfulness suggests a profound level of connection between all things. In this way, both IFS and mindfulness promote an awareness, which finds value in cultivating compassion for ourselves and for those around us.

References

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Nhat Hanh, T. (1988). *Being Peace*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.