

How mindfulness supports activism

– a case study from Richard Reoch

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I have spent much of my life working in situations of extreme conflict. These include war zones and places of torture and human cruelty. The people who are working for peace and defending human rights in these situations are under a lot of stress. They face tremendous pressure. There is a lot of argument, criticism and disagreement. There is a high level of burn out. I feel my ability to stick with this work is probably due to my mindfulness practice. It has supported me in three ways: stability, clarity, and strength. My experience may be helpful to others working in fields of social activism where there is a lot of pressure, differing views and strong emotions.

Stability

In mindfulness practice we come back to the body breathing as the vehicle for dwelling in the present moment. This helps stabilize our minds. Similarly, when we are overwhelmed by feelings of doubt, helplessness, hopelessness, depression and panic, our mindfulness practice can help us remain fully present in the midst of these feelings.

First, it is very helpful to see those reactions as thoughts and emotions, just as we do when we notice “thinking” during mindfulness practice. In the same way that we bring our minds back to our breath, we can notice these intense reactions, acknowledge them, and bring our minds back to our original intention. We remind ourselves of the reason we engaged in the work in the first place. Our reactions to the work, like our other thoughts and feelings, are simply that. We do not repress our feelings; we acknowledge them for what they are. Doing this helps us see that the discomfort and the despair we experience are part of what arises as we fulfil our original commitment, just the way doctors become familiar with the shit, piss and blood that comes with their work.

A second aspect of stabilising the mind is to approach social engagement as a marathon not a sprint. Mindfulness practice helps develop this steadiness, just as daily exercise trains a long-distance runner. We often see people who join a cause with high hopes, expectations and ideals. When they encounter challenges and frustrations they find they don't have the stamina to keep going. They get easily disappointed by failure and lack of results. We need people who are going to stick with the challenges

through all the ups and downs. Stability of mind results in commitment to the work, regardless of outcome. Thomas Merton once said, "Do not depend on the hope of results, depend rather on the value of the work itself".

The third aspect of stability has to do with possibility or open-mindedness. We experience this in mindfulness practice. We become more open-minded. Not only do we become more open to our own experience, we become more aware of the openness of situations. We see not only the difficulties, but also the opportunities and possibilities they offer. It's very easy to see situations as fixed and unchangeable, particularly under stress. We dismiss the possibility of change. In fact we may feel that attacking a hopeless situation, certain there is nothing we can do, is a kind of heroism! Sadly, this "tough it out" approach often leads to a narrowing down of the mind. If, however, we approach difficulties from the perspective of mindfulness, we tend to bring an open mind to the challenges we face. That is the viewpoint of possibility. This spirit of inquiry, indeed creativity, brings stability of mind in the midst of whatever happens. It is like keeping our eyes open and balancing in a moving boat.

Clarity

Clarity has to do with seeing the full picture. From our mindfulness practice we know that this has both an outer and an inner aspect. We may have a tendency to turn away from the horror of what we are dealing with. It is completely understandable. But if we turn away, we may lose the clarity that comes from completeness of vision. We risk missing both the complexities and the opportunities of a situation. We end up reducing intricate realities to simplistic generalisations. In intense conflict this often happens. This "turning away" can take various forms. For example, if we are involved in conflict resolution work, we are required to be impartial, inclusive and balanced. But it is very easy for our minds to be swayed by the latest atrocity. We may close down towards one side or the other, or to certain people or groups. If our minds "turn away" from trying to see and embrace the full picture – which also requires stability – then it is very easy to be blinded by our own "stereotypes of the mind".

For example, if we are truly committed to reconciliation, we have to have the clarity of mind to set aside our own prejudices and enter into dialogue with people who represent the opposite of what we stand for. That clarity of mind is developed by the precision of mindfulness practice. Clarity is closely related to inquiry. Being able to inquire into our own attitudes and the attitudes of others – and to inquire into the multi-dimensional quality of situations – is key. Seeing the full picture is also the gateway to inclusiveness. Otherwise we may be pursuing a path to peace which seems to us to be inclusive, but which, owing to the unwitting prejudice of our own minds, is not.

We need to be clear about our own entrenched ideas. We need to be aware of our own tendency towards “fascism of the mind”. This is the tendency to think our own thoughts are right and to expect others to agree with us. It's not uncommon for people to harbour this subtle, and not fully recognised, tendency to think they are right. When they join a group that supports a common cause, they assume that everyone else in the group will have the same analysis and same approach as they do. They then get confused, disappointed and frustrated when they witness internal disagreements or find people within the group arguing with them. Many people cannot handle this micro-level diversity of opinion and interpersonal aggression within an idealistic organisation. So they leave.

When we practice mindfulness, our loyalty is less to our own theoretical constructs and more to this open field of awareness and open-heartedness in which our thoughts can become transparent to themselves. This clarity enables us to inquire, when confronted with disagreement: “What is the life experience of the other person?” This is the basis of regard for others.

Strength

When we first hear about “strength” in the mindfulness tradition, we may think that this refers to being solid and unbreakable like a rock. Sometimes we hear about meditating like a mountain. We may think this means that nothing will affect us and we will be free from all disturbing feelings. That is a misunderstanding. The mountain is very much alive, open to all the elements and supporting countless forms of life. This strength is radical openness, unconditional vulnerability. Vulnerability means the ability to experience fully the sensations of whatever arises. Unconditional means the ability to experience those sensations fully, without pre-conditions or limits. This is extremely helpful to the social activist in three ways:

First, if we are dealing with people who have experienced extreme trauma, we know that one of the most important things is for them to be able to open up to someone who is willing to listen to them fully. As mindfulness practitioners we may be able to play that role, to be someone who is willing to accept the truth of their experience, no matter how painful that is. To be able to be present for someone in this way we ourselves must be willing to walk with them wherever they may take us.

Second, we need to be willing to go beyond our conventional limits of what we find 'acceptable' to us. Not in a moral sense, but in the sense of being willing to enter into dialogues or encounters that scare us. I have talked to terrorists and others whose lives have been steeped in killing. They say they don't know how to talk, only how to kill. Even if the lived experience of others is almost unimaginable to us, we have to be willing to meet them where they are. That openness and willingness is the strength of mindfulness.

Third, this work involves mindful awareness of our own attitudes. Even though we might have the intention to support others or resolve conflicts, we might subtly wish for a kind of egotistical “moral victory”. Or we might inadvertently allow ourselves to become a “victim” of the situations in which we work. Strength here is unconditional sensitivity to our own feelings and tendencies, listening to them and drawing lessons from them – no matter how awkward they may be.

In terms of strength then, the greatest strength is the open hand not the closed fist. It has to do with accommodating the totality of our experience. We might feel that there are some things we simply can't tolerate, but “accommodation” goes beyond our habits of tolerating or not tolerating. It has to do with having as complete a view as possible of whatever we are experiencing. This applies to whatever field we are working in. For example, if we work in the field of social justice, “accommodating the totality” means not merely caring for individuals, but extending that concern to the larger social context or system that shapes so much of the way people live their lives.