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The Potential Impact of Mindfulness Meditation Practices on Identity Development and Psychological Stability for Adolescents

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Abiding in silence... *Breathing in... I am aware of breathing in...Breathing out...I am aware of breathing out.* Distractions arise... *hearing...hearing...breathing in...breathing out...The judging mind arises,.. "I can't do this...this is boring... uncomfortable" judging...judging... Back to the breath.... breathing in...breathing out ...the feel of the breath flowing in and out of the body...The body relaxes a bit, the mind settles ever so slightly and there are several moments of going on being...perhaps longer... Then body sensations or thoughts come to the forefront once more...gently noticing...welcoming... labeling ... accepting ... holding ...breathing in...breathing out.* And so the back and forth dance of ego and self occurs in just five minutes of mindfulness practice.

Twenty-five hundred years ago the challenge to "Know Thyself" was carved on the wall of the Oracle Apollo at Delphi, which to the Greeks was the center of the world (Snell, 1982). In her reflections on the interplay of self and ego, Jacobson (1964) states that we come to "know ourselves," to construct who we are and how we relate to others, in two distinct ways. First, by a "direct awareness of our inner experiences," which she describes as the subjective experience of sensations and functions of the body and the thoughts and emotions internally generated. Second, we arrive at a degree of self-knowledge by "viewing ourselves as objects; that is, by achieving a (more or less) detached stance vis-à-vis our own activities." Jacobson could easily be describing mindfulness meditation. Engaging in mindfulness practices fosters a renewed awareness of, and connection with, what might be called the basic building blocks of self experience: things like warmth, coolness. inner pangs of hunger, bodily tensions and a multitude of other (some nameless) proprioceptive experiences of bodily aliveness. Yet, within the practice of mindfulness there is a

simultaneous gentle witnessing occurring and a varying degree of redirecting of one's attention back to the unfolding experience of the present moment. It is this interplay of self and ego within mindfulness practices and the stabilizing impact on one's sense of self that first led me to consider its applications for adolescents, a group for which coming to know themselves is the primary developmental challenge.

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When Erickson (1968) discussed the process of how adolescents come to 'know themselves' and form an integrated, stable sense of identity, he incorporated both a self component and an ego component in this process. He described the Ego as "a central and partially unconscious organizing agency" which is faced with and participates in the task of synthesizing a multiplicity of "fluctuating self-experiences" that ebb and flow as the adolescent struggles to maintain a sense of inner sameness and continuity in the face of obvious physical, psychological, and social changes. Erickson (1968) suggested that identity formation gradually emerges from experiences in which various self-states are successfully reintegrated and synthesized by the ego. I have proposed (Verni, 2001) that the interplay between ego and self that Erickson postulates to occur in the macrocosm of the adolescent's environment, occurs, in some sense, within the microcosm of each meditation session. The body sensations, emotions, thoughts, judgments, impatience, desires, aversions, frustrations, excitements, boredoms, fantasies, expectations, etc., that are "lived through" during even a single ten minute meditative session provides much practice with the "stuff" of our lives. Engaging in the practice of mindfulness meditation simply increases the amount of time we devote to genuinely experiencing ourselves on a moment to moment basis, apart from the busyness of life or in contrast to our tendency to distract ourselves from our inner world. Adolescence can be a particularly challenging time with regard to feeling alienated from one's physical and instinctual life, leading Blois (1979) to state that the successful navigation through the adolescent passage involves the adolescent taking psychological ownership of his or her own body and thoughts. In this article, I will be

offering an abbreviated sampling of thoughts regarding how the basic elements of mindfulness practice silence, breath awareness and bare attention (sustained moment to moment attention to one's experience with a spacious acceptance of all that arises) can have a positive impact on adolescent identity development and the promotion of greater psychological stability, thus, facilitating the quest to "know" and "take ownership" over themselves as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

Back to the breath

Sustained awareness of breath plays an extremely important role in mindfulness meditation due to the way such awareness anchors consciousness in the body. Kabat-Zinn (1990) emphasizes the importance of the breath as an ever present link between mind and body. He describes it as a curious phenomenon since it is clearly a physiological process whose regulation most often occurs automatically without conscious effort on our part, yet it also can be subjected to direct conscious awareness and it often responds directly to mental events. Attending to the breath can quickly reveal to the meditator how much of a flux we are in at all times. In focusing on the breath. Kabat-Zinn (1990) reports "we are learning right from the start to get comfortable with change" (p. 49), Within the tradition of mindfulness practice. awareness of the breath is seen as a means of re-introducing an individual to the experience of "being" in the body and facilitates a willingness to stay with and accept all that arises.

Eigen (1993) offers an interesting theoretical discussion of how attending to and sustaining a gentle awareness of ones breath (what he calls "experienced breathing") can facilitate the process of consciously remaining in our bodies with less ambivalence and tension. In his paper entitled, Breathing and Identity (Eigen, 1993), he describes the breath as a rhythmic, continuous, and consciously accessible body experience that, when made the object of sustained attention, can provide the ego with support for its own sense of constancy and cohesion. He suggests a process in which experienced breathing creates a "safety zone" within the body for the ego to use as it strives to stay connected to the multitude of bodily sensations and experiences.¹ Furthermore, Eigen (1993) describes a shift in the experience of self that occurs when one practices mindful breathing, drawing on the contrast between the experience of the self

via the breath with the experience of self rooted in appetite. He suggests that the body's appetites can be far more ambivalent experiences, which are often disturbing or irritating due to the gap between the felt want and the moment of gratification. Whereas breathing usually takes care of itself, and unlike appetite, is supplied with an ever present source of gratification. Thus, when made the object of attention, mindful breathing can allow for a greater sense of continuity within the ebb and flow of bodily tensions giving rise to a feeling of well-being. This repeated practice of maintaining a gentle focus on one's breath can provide multiple experiences of being present in or with one's body in a less conflicted or ambivalent manner. Eigen also highlights the preventative nature (and relevance for adolescents) of an established practice of breath awareness, stating that "a self-feeling as easy and continuous as breathing, once firmly established remains an underlying thread through whatever *crisis or current discontinuity of identity* one may have to solve" (p. 47, italics added).

This model of using breath awareness as a "safety zone" is particularly relevant for adolescents due to the increases in internal tension as related to onset of puberty and increased social stressors. When one engages in mindfulness meditation, the experiences of restlessness, hunger, pain, frustration, impulses to get up, sleepiness, emotional surges, tingling, itching, etc., all challenge the ego with regard to satisfying the underlying desires or cravings inherent in the sensations listed. As the ego of the practicing adolescent² gains an enhanced connection with a breath-based experience of self, which it experiences as a "safety zone," it can gradually strengthen its ability to withstand or "ride out" the appetitive urges of the body. This repeated practice of using breath awareness as a means to gain greater experience with riding out the waves of impulses, cravings, and sensations that emanate from the body helps the practicing adolescent gain multiple experiences with the subsequent diminution or cessation of these "waves" which have been successfully acknowledged, yet resisted. In my experience with adolescents, I have found that they can quickly grasp and make use of the metaphor of surfing emotional waves and impulses.³ Here, the ego of the practicing adolescent can be described as holding the "wanting" or appetite based self until it "calms down." Thus, as the practicing adolescent moves away (developmentally) from her parents, rejecting the parental ego support which was available

during childhood, she can learn how to "parent" herself within the meditative environment as her own ego learns to "hold" the various reactive self-states.

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To expand the parenting analogy further, one can view the components of mindfulness practice such as silence, breath, and body awareness and bare attention (also referred to as choiceless awareness) as making up a holding environment that is 'good enough' in a Winnicottian sense (Epstein, 1995). This meditative environment is good enough in that it allows the physiological, affective, and cognitive experiences of the body/self to present themselves and be attended to in a non-reactive, wordless environment of trust created by the steady flow of the breath and a non-judgmental awareness of all that arises. Epstein (1995) proposes the restorative potential of the bare attention cultivated in mindfulness practices as follows:

By separating out the reactive self from the core experience, the practice of bare attention eventually returns the meditator to a state of unconditioned openness that bears an important resemblance to the feeling engendered by an optimally attentive parent. It does this by relentlessly uncovering the reactive self and returning the meditator, again and again, to the raw material of experience. According to Winnicott, only in this "state of not having to react" can the self "begin to be" (p. 117).

Thus, within the gaze of the palpably present, yet non-reactive attention that is cultivated via mindfulness, the practicing adolescent is able to experience moments in which there is a "continuity of being." As this process is repeated, the practicing adolescent has multiple opportunities to re-connect with his or her own internal processes (physiological and mental) without the potentially distorting reactions typically generated from learned or otherwise internalized judgments or preconceptions. In this manner, mindfulness practices have the capacity to facilitate the subjective experiences of continuity and authenticity in the practicing adolescent, thereby facilitating the emergence of a more expansive, yet coherent and authentic sense of

self. In addition, the element of silence and with it the emphasis on significantly minimizing verbal conceptual thought can be particularly important with regard to Winnicott's conceptualization of the self. Winnicott (1963) asserts that all individuals come to possess an aspect of being, which he refers to as the "incommunicado element," that is not available to communication with the external, or objective world.

This inaccessible, isolated center of being engages only in a kind of silent internal communication and is, according to Winnicott, an early core of selfness which is entirely subjective and which is experienced as that aspect of one's being that is most genuinely actual or real. According to Federn (1934) this hidden aspect of one's being is responsible for the largely unnoticed sense of continuity which is commonly felt as one's own sense of "I." James (1984) included this experiential witness in his concept of the self-as-knower or the "I" (in contrast to the self-as-known or the "me"). This self-as-knower, also referred to as the subjective self, holds a strong sense of distinctness and continuity over time and it is this aspect of self that Erickson (1968) described when he defined a sense of identity as "a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity" (p. 21). Thus, repeatedly entering into a silent, experiential space during mindfulness meditation can perhaps be an important conduit for a strong inner sense of continuity and authenticity to be revealed since the self, according to Winnicott, is most genuinely felt to be real when experienced as a solitary exchange with one's own subjectivity (Socor, 1997). In this light, the sustained and consistent practice of mindfulness meditation can facilitate greater connection with a core sense of self that is purely non-verbal/non-conceptual and perhaps the multiple experiences of mindfully abiding in silence with the "I," (the self-as-knower) would help to counteract the developmental tendency of adolescents to lose themselves in the "me" (the self-as-known) as they struggle with strong preoccupations with how they are being seen by their peers. Without some feeling of authenticity, an adolescent can easily get "lost" in a desperate pursuit of superficial marks of distinction or uniqueness that only exacerbates a sense of self-alienation, confusion, and a feeling of being "fake."

Going on being

As we come to know ourselves within the good enough meditative environment, the self we experience is one which is an ongoing, constantly emerging process as opposed to a static or fixed entity. Epstein (1995) refers to this process as "uncovering the spatial metaphor." He highlights the manner in which the self is most often referred to in spatial terms: an entity with boundaries, layers, and composed of constituent parts or structures. However, by gently applying and maintaining a bare awareness of exactly what is happening in the mind and body as it occurs, the meditator can come to know and/or experience the self in a more intimate manner that subsequently results in a greater awareness of the "self as process" as opposed to "self as an entity" (Epstein, 1995). The appreciation of this temporally based dimension of self stems from the simple, yet elegantly profound instructions, to direct 'bare attention' to bodily based experiences as they occur, thus revealing the fluid, constantly shifting nature of self experience. Several authors have discussed the sense of self as originating, in some fashion, in the workings of the biophysiological substrate (Mahler & McDevitts, 1982, Kernberg, 1982; Stern, 1985) thus providing some theoretical support for the impact that attending to body sensations can have on the sense of self. In the Mahler and McDevitt (1982) paper entitled, "Thoughts on the Emergence of the Sense of Self with Particular Emphasis on the Body Self," the authors clearly assert that the self emerges, and is first recognized as a bodily self. "We want to stress," say Mahler and McDevitt (1982) that "at the very earliest developmental stage, proprioception, with minimal influence from sensory inputs, conveys the first glimmerings of a primitive core of a body self" (p.829). In addition, Kernberg (1982) suggests that subjective experience in the form of affective pleasure and pain, is present from birth and that this "affective subjectivity" is "the primordial experience of self" (p 8). Finally, Stern (1985) proposes a sense of self from the very beginning of life, suggesting that "some senses of self do exist long prior to self-awareness and language" (p. 6). Stern (1985) describes four concomitant senses of self (emergent, core, subjective, and verbal) that relate to various domains of self-experience generated by the maturing capacities and abilities available to the infant.

The emergent self, according to Stern (1985), is the sense of self that is as it engages in its own becoming, it is "on the way to being." Here,

the self is not an entity so much as a felt experience, one that exists on the level of direct, non-reflexive, experiential awareness rather than at the level of conceptual formulation and is always available as a background of non-reflexive awareness (Socor, 1997). Thus, the emergent self is "known" only as a fluid state of "coming into being," not a fixed point of reference, but a process. Therefore, when the practicing adolescent experiences a body sensation or craving and gently "holds" it with bare attention, he enters into a process of active (emergent) being as opposed to reactive doing and is phenomenologically linked to the earliest glimmers of an emergent sense of self. In this manner, bringing mindful attention to bodily sensations and felt experience can facilitate the experience of the self as an unfolding, emerging process as opposed to a fixed entity that must be found, discovered, or manufactured. This more fluid experience can help to avoid an economic view of the self in which the self is defined as having an "excess of bad stuff" or "insufficient good stuff" (Rosenbaum, 1999), something of particular relevance for adolescents. Additionally, this temporal perspective of the self can highlight the important role of personal choices with regard to their impact on the self that is re-created moment by moment and also foster a capacity to re-work relationships to past events as opposed to being forced to "store" them in the warehouse of a spatially conceived self (Rosenbaum, 1999).

The repeated practice of mindfulness, therefore, can facilitate a freedom from feeling constrained by labels, transient physical or social limitations, or historical events that might otherwise be seen as confining an individual to a fixed, immutable sense of who he/she is without the potential for alternative experiences (evaluations) of self over time. The experience and conceptualization of the self as a fluid, emerging process can have a profoundly positive impact on adolescents as they struggle to make sense of the changes occurring in their inner and outer worlds.

In summary, the elements of sustained silence, breath awareness, and bare attention during mindfulness practices not only provide multiple opportunities to enhance and develop ego strengths such as impulse control, frustration tolerance, and delay of gratification, they also provide the practicing adolescent with a self-paced, experiential education in the transient nature of internal tension states, and a more fluid, continuous and authentic experience of self. The

experience of a more fluid conception of the self as an ever-changing process can perhaps lessen the degree of stress typically experienced in response to all the psychosocial and physiological changes the adolescent is experiencing and may help to put these "passing events" into a larger perspective. In this manner, the multiple and varied roles the adolescent finds him or herself in may be experienced as less contradictory or hypocritical when there is a greater appreciation for and experience with the fluctuating varieties of self-experience via the practice of mindfulness. In other words, the practice of mindfulness may foster increased flexibility with regard to defining oneself as an aggregate of many possibilities, none of which need hold any insurmountable meaning for the adolescent's developing identity.

Additionally, any one "event" within the adolescent's peer group (such as an embarrassing moment or awkwardness) would perhaps hold less defining power with regard to "who one is" as the practicing adolescent becomes increasingly aware of the answer to this question being a fluid, ever-changing, work in progress. Thus, as the practicing adolescent repeatedly experiences the elements of human life within the meditative environment, there is great potential for the development of increased psychological stability and an enhanced process of identity formation.

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¹ "As the experience of breathing is slowly distinguished from the flux of changing body states it is perceived as a safety zone, a gentle regularity in the midst of unpredictable momentary or periodic fluctuations. The fearful or exhausted ego uses its experience of the predictable smooth flow of breath as a retreat and stepping stone from which to regroup and progress more deeply into the body... In so doing, it strengthens both its capacity for observation and its receptivity to perceived body aliveness." (Eiden, 1993, p. 44).

² My term for an adolescent who regularly engages in mindfulness practices.

³ Kabat-Zinn (1994, p.32) describes a mindful relationship to one's emotions in the statement, "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf."

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