

How to Bring Peace into the Room and Develop the Personal Qualities Required to Become Our Conversations

By G. Daniel Bowling, Esq.
Sausalito, California

Generally, when a mediator or conflict resolver walks into a room with clients or parties, she confronts conflict which is generating varying levels of suffering – either emotional, physical, or circumstantial. Clearly, there is much suffering on the planet, particularly in the 21st Century with its environmental destruction, global warming, a growing gap between the super rich and everyone else, terrorism and war, sharp political divisions, and religious fundamentalism among many challenges and conflicts reverberating around the world. Resolving conflict to relieve suffering is a worthy goal for any profession. Learning to bring something into the room, in addition to our mediation or conflict resolution skills, can be the source of tremendous personal and professional fulfillment.

The ancient phrase – physician heal thyself – is fundamental to any conversation for dispute resolution practitioners about what we bring into a room beyond our skills, experience, and knowledge. The concept of bringing anything intangible to someone other than one's self is a paradoxical one. The belief that the professional is one who knows and the client is one who does not know may have validity regarding technical and specific matters directly within the professional's expertise, but not, however, beyond this narrow frame. There are far too many examples of mediator hubris – believing that we know what is best for a party in conflict. The importance of resolving a conflict does not justify offering our services inappropriately. We must approach the topic of what we bring into a mediation room, therefore, with great humility and care.

How can we ascertain what we actually bring into the room?

Reflective practice is simply defined as taking time to reflect on what one does professionally – *e.g.*, a “pro-con” session after any work, looking back at a case after one has closed the file or at a mediation after a session – in order to distill any lessons learned and create a developmental path to integrate those lessons into one's work. The etymology is instructive. *Reflect* is from the Latin *re*, back or again, plus *flectere*, *flex*, to bend. Thus, *reflect* has the same origin as *flexible*. When we are reflective, we bend back or again in order to see more clearly, and we are flexible in that seeing. Becoming a reflective practitioner allows one to explore what one actually brings into the conflict resolution room.

Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, explores what it means to be a competent practitioner by asking: “What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage?”¹ Lang and Taylor, in *The Making of a Mediator: Developing Artistry in Practice*, provide an answer to Schon's query:

¹ Schon, D. A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

Reflection is the process by which professionals think about the experiences, events, and situations of practice and then attempt to make sense of them in light of the professionals' understanding of relevant theory. The objects of reflection are the unique, uncertain nature of a particular situation, the practice skills appropriate to the circumstance, and the constellation of theories that might help explain what is occurring.²

While I agree fully with Lang and Taylor as far as they go in describing reflective practice, in my experience, there are additional objects of reflection beyond the particular circumstances and the applicable skills and theories. A crucial additional answer to Shon's query about a professional's "ways of knowing" requires focusing on developing greater self-awareness through inner work. By using this expanded approach to reflective practice, we can greatly enhance our own development process and step onto the road towards professional mastery.

Self-awareness or inner work

Western culture, especially on the professional level, has been somewhat disdainful of inner work, clearly preferring and advancing intellectual intelligence. Yet, there are many ancient spiritual traditions based on practices designed to focus one's consciousness on the inner, in addition to the external, world. These practices exist in all major religions and, in general, distinguish the *esoteric* pursuit of religion from the *exoteric*. Especially in more mainstream, traditional expressions of major religions, exoteric practices – such as attending services, doing good works, charitable donations, adhering to an ethical or moral code of conduct, and proselytizing for converts – have come to be almost fully identified with approved religious practice. By contrast, esoteric practices – such as physical disciplines from the martial arts to yoga, dietary restrictions, meditation, silence, extended retreats, or withdrawal from worldly matters all together – have all but vanished from mainstream religious observance, certainly in the West.

The dominate culture's support for either the esoteric or the exoteric approach has a deep impact on that culture far beyond religious expression. One example is the impact of esoteric religious practices of indigenous people across the globe on their cultural view towards political and economic expansion contrasted with the political and economic view arising from Western exoteric religious practices. Another example is the reverence for the Earth and its fragile environment found among indigenous people with esoteric practices, as opposed to the prevailing Western view that humans have dominion over the Earth.

This distinction also impacts on the way a culture thinks, teaches, and learns. Obviously, exoteric practices pull for thinking, teaching, and learning that places strong emphasis on knowing the external world through scientific and intellectual perspectives dependent on mental intelligence, often to the exclusion of the inner world and other forms of intelligence or "ways of knowing." Success is viewed as only externally driven and

² Lang, M.D. and Taylor, A. *The Making of a Mediator: Developing Artistry in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000

measured by academic, financial or power-based achievement. By contrast, esoteric practices emphasize a range of intelligences in addition to mental, such as spiritual intelligence – awareness of one’s inner experiences and of one’s connections with the entire web of life; emotional intelligence – awareness of one’s feelings, human connections, and deep personal insights; and physical or kinesthetic intelligence – awareness of one’s bodily sensations.³

Towards the end of the 20th century, esoteric practices began to gain greater acceptance in the West, in some situations actually rising to the level of academic creditability. The development of psychotherapy as an acceptable worldview and, in particular, Carl Jung played a major role in this shift. Our field of dispute resolution is leading a similar shift in the more traditional exoteric worldview of the legal profession.

Developmental awareness

It is difficult for many of us to “be in development.” Our culture, especially our academic culture, pulls for knowledge and certainty about that knowledge. Our culture prefers experts, and we have learned to present ourselves as having expertise in order to develop a practice as a conflict resolver. Reflective practice is actually impossible in such a space. When one already knows, on what can one reflect? Recall the etymology of *reflect*. In a world of certainty, one cannot be flexible. One cannot bend again. Our sight is limited, indeed defined, by what we believe and even more by what we believe that we already know.

Developmental awareness demands flexibility and the ability to see with new eyes, hear with new ears, and learn with a fresh mind. Developmental awareness is synonymous with reflective practice. Consider how we ourselves developed as mediators, conflict resolvers, or professors. For most of us, the process seems to involve three major “stages.” Although we describe these aspects of our development sequentially, for some mediators they may occur in a different order, overlap, or occur to some degree simultaneously.⁴

First, as beginning mediators, we studied technique. We learned, among other things, active listening, reframing, focusing on interests, prioritizing issues, and helping the parties generate options. We learned to demonstrate empathy as well as impartiality, how to diagnose settlement barriers, and how, with any luck, to bring a case to closure. We looked for opportunities to practice these skills. A period of apprenticeship ensued, involving, for some of us, co-mediation with more experienced colleagues, observation of other mediators, and opportunities for debriefing and peer supervision.

³ Gardner, H. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books, 1983; Goleman, D. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995; Goleman, D. and C. Cherniss, *The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace: How to Select For, Measure, and Improve Emotional Intelligence in Individuals, Groups, and Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001; Goleman, D. *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, 1998; Hersh, P. “Heart to Heart: The Physical Correlation of Verbal Communication.” *Human Potential*, March/April, 1986, 16-22; Salovey P. and Mayer, J. “Emotional Intelligence,” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 9 (185-211) 1990; and Wolman, R. *Thinking with Your Soul: Spiritual Intelligence and Why it Matters*. New York: Random House, 2001.

⁴ D. Bowling and D. Hoffman, “Bringing Peace into the Room: The Personal Qualities of the Mediator and Their Impact on the Mediation,” *Negotiation Journal* 5 (2000). I also acknowledge Dr. Ken Anbender for his contribution to these ideas concerning stages of development – <http://contegritywisdom.com/>.

The second stage of our learning to be a conflict resolver involved working toward a deeper understanding of how and why mediation works. In seeking an intellectual grasp of the mediation process we hoped to find the tools with which to assess the effectiveness of various techniques, identify appropriate professional and ethical boundaries, and better understand what we were doing, why we were doing it, and the meaning of the process for our clients. These intellectual inquiries — encompassing both empirical and theoretical research and normative discussions of mediation practice — increased our effectiveness as mediators and enhanced the personal satisfaction we derived from this work.

The third stage of our growth as mediators is the frontier for professional and personal development. This stage begins with the mediator's growing awareness of how her personal qualities – for better or worse – influence the mediation process. At this stage, we begin to focus on, and take responsibility for, our own development as mediators. We learn to focus on *being* a mediator, rather than simply *doing* certain prescribed steps dictated by a particular mediation school or theory. In this stage, reflective practice is fundamental. Mediator David Matz wrote, in a paper entitled *The Hope of Mediation*: “In addition to what a mediator does, there is the matter of what a mediator is. Spirit emanates from being, just as articulately as it does from doing. More specifically, it is the mediator's being, as experienced by the parties, that sends the message.”⁵ My conception of this third task is developmental – that is, it is based on the premise that gaining mastery is an ongoing process.

An example of the differences among these stages of development can be seen by looking at a particular feature of the mediation process – for example, reframing. In skills training (first stage), mediators are taught how to restate and reframe the parties' accounts in a way that helps them feel heard and understood. Further reading and study (second stage) might demonstrate the reasons why reframing is an effective technique. At the level of development (third stage), the mediator cultivates the ability to achieve a more profound interpersonal connection with the parties, so that any reframing resonates with authenticity.

Development requires a different relationship to conversation

Theodore Zeldin, a former Dean at Oxford University in England, describes the importance of bringing a high level of intentionality into our conversation – the arena in which mediation lives:

“(t)alking does not necessarily change one's own or other people's feelings or ideas.... The twenty-first century needs...to develop not talk but conversation, which does change people. Real conversation catches fire. It involves more than sending and receiving information.... The kind of conversation I am interested in is one which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk. It's an adventure in which we agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter.”⁶

⁵ Matz, D. *The Hope of Mediation*. Unpublished paper, 1999.

⁶ Zeldin, Theodore, *Conversation: How Talk can Change our Lives*. New Jersey: Hiddenspring, 2000.

The kind of integrative conversation Dr. Zeldin described is not our normal, ordinary conversation. It is conversation freed of the constrictions of our current culturally-based separative worldview. In addition, Dr. Zeldin urged us literally to ***become our conversations*** by imbuing them with personal qualities that are grounded in an integrated, relationally-based worldview, which is the foundation for mastering mediation and conflict resolution. A conversation imbued with such personal qualities, ***a conversation that we are*** generates developmental power for all parties engaged in that conversation.

Talking to or at one another, rather than becoming authentic, integrative, developmental conversations, is a fundamental source of our social and political malaise, youth violence, and loss of values – the suffering that calls out for healing. We do not engage in meaningful conversations, which our conflict resolution field has a particular responsibility to facilitate. We are not as in demand as mediators as many of us would like to be. Why? In part because the expertise we offer is not grounded in how we live and practice. Expertise that comes from the head, and not from our being and from who we are, does not even work well in sports or music. Yet somehow we believe that it will work in a profession based on communication. Mastering mediation, mastering conversation requires intense self-developmental or inner work. To bring conflict resolution broadly to a world in desperate need of it, we must focus on this third stage – developing the personal qualities required to ***become our conversations***.

The first step is this developmental process requires that we shift the way we hold conversation from talking to, at, around, and over each other toward the new form of conversation Zeldin described as involving “...more than sending and receiving information.” Now pause for a moment and think about how you truly “hold” conversation. Our world is built on conversation that focuses solely on sending and receiving information. That is the ordinary level of our discourse. It is the ground from which conflicts arise – knowing that “this” information is true and right but “that” information is wrong and bad, or believing in or caring about or wanting to know “this” information but not “that” information. Revealing myself to you based on what I know or do not know, what I like or do not like, and what I believe or do not believe, rather than who I am being. We must move beyond conversation as a very narrow, disconnected space where I want to get what is in my head into your head and obtain your agreement, so I can decide whether you are appropriate to be in my life. Such exoteric conversation that is primarily mental and intellectual, with very little physical embodiment or relational connection is outer directed, rather than inner directed. It is disconnected, rather than connected. It is separative, rather than integrative.

Zeldin wrote that he was interested instead in conversation in which the participants:

- 1) Start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person
- 2) Engage in an experiment with the results never guaranteed.
- 3) Take risks to create an adventure in which we “agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter.”

What does it take to generate that kind of conversation?

The personal qualities required to become our conversations

Most of us have had experiences where “magic” happened. A mediation session produced a surprising result with deep satisfaction or healing for the parties. A complex dispute was resolved because we found ourselves trying an unusually creative approach for the first time, and it worked! Many of us have also experienced explosions in our own personal or professional development, followed by a plateau which may last a long time, where we may begin to feel stuck or stale. All of these experiences beg the questions: How do I reliably replicate experiences in which I see a direct correlation between my contribution and a terrific result? How do I generate a conversation in which “we agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter? How do I become my conversations?

The journey to answering this query begins with the choice to take an esoteric path, a path of inner awareness and self-development, rather than only an exoteric approach, attempting to develop an intellectual grasp of conversation. Mastery of any activity simply cannot happen, without practice and the risk entailed with practice in order to expand one’s esoteric, inner knowing. We all have strong memories of individuals who brought a unique presence into our lives. Many of us experienced a special teacher who awakened within us a spark of desire to learn or who recognized a gift we had that we had not fully acknowledged for ourselves or who encouraged us in ways that no one else had done.

Sometimes that person was a parent, a grandparent, a minister, rabbi, priest, mullah, or other spiritual leader. Regardless of the source of our experiencing that deep, life-altering connection, it is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. When missing, there is often a disconnection from community and sometimes lasting psychological damage. All human development requires connection on this deeper level. I often wondered what it was about Mr. Yoakum, my high school math teacher, and Dr. Jones, my college history professor, that generated special developmental experiences for me. After many years of personal exploration and my own inner work, I have lived into the answer to my query. It is a single word – *presence*.

A certain person came to the Friend's door and knocked.

"Who's there?"

"It's me."

The Friend answered, "Go away. There's no place for raw meat at this table."

The individual went wandering for a year. Nothing but the fire of separation can change hypocrisy and ego. The person returned completely cooked, walked up and down in front of the Friend's house, gently knocked.

"Who is it?"

"You."

"Please come in, my Self, there's no place in this house for two."⁷

⁷ Barks, Coleman, translator, *The Essential Rumi*. San Francisco: Harper, 1995.

1) Presence

The fundamental personal quality required for becoming our conversations is presence. We know it when we sense it, but what exactly is it? Examining the etymology of a word often allows us to grasp its subtle meaning and open a developmental pathway to that meaning. *Present* is from the present participle of the Latin (*pre*) *praesens*, *praesent* – meaning “to be before: in the sense of to be before one at hand.” Thus, one could define *presence* as *being completely wherever we are and fully with whoever is there with us in each moment*. Presence is possible only to the degree that we are not caught in the past or the future. It is not possible to be *present completely where we are and fully with whoever is there with us*, while thinking about the past or the future. Most of us face challenges with our ability to avoid thinking about the past or the future. Presence is thus an extremely challenging practice, which requires years of development on many levels. For example, as you continue to read this paper, count how many times your mind wanders off, making associations, thinking of something that you need to do, or recalling some past experience.

Becoming our conversations only happens when we are fully present. When present, we simply are. We embody whatever is arising, without judgment, without distinction, with full acceptance. We cannot be, we cannot embody, if we are separate from whatever is arising in our presence, if we are separate from whomever is with us. Conversation arises naturally whenever we are present.

2) Presence requires intention

Most of us are lazy in using our intentionality – our will force, the second essential personal quality. It is rare to operate during a day with a specific intention, as opposed to a goal or a list of things to accomplish. Even when we set an intention or goal or write out a “to do” list, we often find it difficult to remain focused. In truth, we have little, if any, control over our minds, which are at the effect of our unresolved past and our fears about the future. *Presence* arises as we learn to release the past and the future and find our way into each present moment – the only reality we will ever know. *Presence* cannot arise with an uncontrolled mind.⁸

We see this ability to remain focused for long periods most easily in outstanding athletes or musicians. Someone who plays at the highest level of her/his sport or instrument has developed the ability to be completely focused, avoiding mistakes from loss of concentration. Such an individual is also guided by a clear intention – to win a game or to play Rachmaninoff’s *Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, op. 30*.

3) Belonging to the conversation

Normally, we hold conversation as an observer or critic. We are impatient for the other person to pause, so that we can get in our truth, our valuable and essential insight. Intentional, authentic conversation—grounded in presence – conversation that actually has a possibility of integrating different points of view into something entirely new, something different from, beyond either point of view requires us to *belong to that conversation* – the third essential personal quality that opens the possibility of becoming our conversations.

⁸ Tolle, E. *The Power of Now*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1997.

The etymology of the word conversation is from the Latin *conversari*, to turn about with and from *con* or *com*, meaning together, among, with plus *versi*, meaning to turn. Thus, conversation literally means the act of turning about together among others. Infusing our conversations with a focused intention to be turned about with another, such that we come at least to see and understand another's worldview and perhaps even allow ourselves to be turned about by that worldview is a conversation worth having and a life worth living. Such a conversation absolutely requires one to be present fully, to be with another.

Belonging to a conversation is the essence of presence, surrendering fully, allowing ourselves to be turned about with others, allowing ourselves to be changed by what unfolds in those conversations. Belonging to a conversation does not require us to give up our own point of view, nor does it mean holding on to our point of view. It does not mean adopting the other's view, or resisting the other's view. This personal quality requires a deep surrender to the process of an intentional, authentic conversation through being willing to engage with another so as to be turned about with the other in conversation, but we cannot create this space as long as we know.

4) Give up certainty – recognize that we truly do not know

Most of us try very hard to know a great deal about many things, to pretend that we know even when we are not certain, or to learn something very quickly before others discover that we do not know it. Knowing is a highly valued quality in every profession. That quality has leaked into conflict resolution work.

For a mediator to “know” is useless. Knowing takes away the power of our listening, the wonder of our inquiry, and the openness of our neutrality. Knowing is most often an effort to control. Yet, the truth is that we have no control over any sphere of life. We understand virtually nothing about the mysteries of Life – including relationships. We are leaves floating on a turbulent river. The need to know, the pretense of knowing blocks presence. Knowing is the mask we hide behind in order not to be present or take the risk of being turned about with another.

We become our conversations whenever we fully belong to them, whenever we are willing to give up our knowing, to give up certainty, and be open to the unfolding process of the conversation. We start from ground zero together. We willingly drop all preconceived notions about who we are and who our partners are. Instead, we step into the firm ground of our mutual humanness, our shared storehouse of weaknesses and strengths, of failures and triumphs, of phoniness and realness – all of who we are. We are then safe to drop our pretense, our phoniness, our personality, and our "act" and generate authenticity.

As mediators, we cannot persuade or push someone to move into this space of open uncertainty. We can, however, model the behavior by being uncertain. This openness is the beginning of true relationship. Most of us would rather be right than in relationship. We definitely do not want to be working on a challenge such as this one, within our own selves, our own family, friends, and co-workers, or our own organizations. We would rather complain and be victims. Developing our capacity not to know – the fourth personal quality that leads to becoming our conversations – allows us to develop the openness essential to mastering presence, as well as mastering mediation.

“The Master doesn’t try to be powerful;
 Thus she is truly powerful.
 The ordinary person keeps reaching for power;
 Thus she never has enough.

The Master does nothing,
 Yet she leaves nothing undone.
 The ordinary man is always doing things,
 Yet many more are left to be done.

Therefore the Master concerns herself
 With the depths and not the surface,
 With the fruit and not the flower.
 She has no will of her own.
 She dwells in reality,
 And lets all illusions go.”⁹

5) **No conversation is about us**

We make virtually everything be about us. Our worlds are almost entirely self-referential. When we are self-focused, we listen primarily to our own thoughts. We worry about how we are doing and whether parties like us and approve of what we are doing. If a conflict resolves or does not resolve, the outcome is always about us. We develop our veneer of certainty to protect our self from being perceived as doing something unskillfully, making a mistake. When we are caught in concerns about our self, we cannot belong to any conversation, simply because we only belong to our self. Self-making destroys our ability to be present, our ability to connect.

Conversation is powerful and vast. Our sense of self will easily drown in the space of a difficult, challenging conversation; however, if we are not busy being concerned about our self, if we are not busy self-making, we can become our conversations. When we become our conversations, we are just as powerful and vast as those conversations, but that power is different than our normal conception of power. It is not power over, rather it is power with and among. Conversations move like the wind both gentle and soft like a breeze and powerful like a storm. Lost in our self, either conversation will blow us away. As we become our conversations, we also move with gentleness and grace or with power that holds and supports, rather than destroys.

6) **Listening from connection to what is not said and not heard**

Being neutral and whatever objective is, does not mean that as conflict resolvers we are separate from the conflict system, we are seeking to help resolve. If, as systems theory teaches, the whole determines the behavior of the parts, then we are inextricably involved in the conflict system. Are we thinking that way about mediation? Resolution occurs when we are a part of, rather than separate from. Do we block resolution by seeking to analyze and understand what happens to each party, separate from the other and by striving to keep ourselves separate from the parties?

⁹ Mitchell, Stephen, translator. *Tao Te Ching*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988.

Deep, empathic listening is based on the intention “*to be before: in the sense of to be before one at hand*” – right in front of us. It requires us to drop any concept of separateness from another. Deep, empathic listening is not about techniques, such as active listening, repeating or mirroring what one has heard. This sixth personal quality is profoundly essential to becoming our conversations. Deep listening is the space of conflict resolution, requiring a deep immersion of our attention with another from a place of connectedness that poet and author Mark Nepo describes as the place where “peace resides in this completeness which arises when our individual sense of being merges with the ongoing stream of being that is the heartbeat of the Universe. Whether these moments arise from great stillness or great suffering or great love, they all seem unexpected and seem to depend on our ability to hold nothing back.”¹⁰

When we know that a conversation is not about us, we can listen from connection and, most importantly, with the power and clarity of becoming our conversation to guide us. In the space of becoming our conversation, we can listen for what is not being said to what we do not hear. We have let go of certainty. We do not know. We are allowing the power and grace of conversation to guide us. We know that the conversation is not about us, so we hear more deeply what is not being spoken or what our personality would normally block us from hearing or what our deeply ingrained patterns of inattentive blindness prevent us from hearing or perceiving. We both hear and see the gorilla wandering through the screen.

How to develop presence, clear intent, and other personal qualities

Becoming a dedicated, life-long practitioner of some form of esoteric practice intensifies the development of the personal qualities required to become our conversations. We do not have to become an expert in an esoteric practice, because the practice will gradually open our inner world and expand our understanding of conversation. Dedicating ourselves to an esoteric practice also deepens our access to reflective practice about our conflict resolution work. Without an esoteric practice, we can only reflect on our external experience – what we or someone else did or did not do, which theory was used and which might work better, or what skill we missed or failed to develop, the same level of reflection described by Lang and Taylor in *The Making of a Mediator*. With an esoteric practice, we develop our ability to reflect not only on our external experience but on our internal awareness, connection, and being.

There are many esoteric practices which allow us to expand access to our inner world. An inner approach to learning many sports is becoming quite common. Certainly, various kinds of therapy are well-traveled paths. Many physical activities can be practiced with an esoteric perspective. Martial arts and yoga all have as their roots a deep appreciation for the inner world. While they are often taught without emphasis on the inner world, one can find teachers who honor a more traditional approach. Meditation is a practice I personally endorse and strongly recommend to any professional who wishes to expand her ability to engage in a reflective professional practice as a pathway to developing the personal qualities required to become her conversations.

¹⁰ Nepo, Mark. *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen: Staying Close to What is Sacred*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2012.

Mindfulness Meditation

For almost forty years, I have practiced various forms of meditation and yoga. Meditation is an ancient art and practice, countless thousands of years old. The Psalmist (46:10) tells us: “Be still and know that I am God.” Jelaluddin Rumi, the well-known 13th Century Sufi mystic and Persian poet (who now rivals Shakespeare for worldwide fame) wrote, “Only the unsayable, jeweled inner life matters.” *Vipassana* or Insight or Mindfulness Meditation was originally delineated in one of Buddha’s very first sermons, known as the *Satipatthana Sutta*, over 2,500 years ago. While its origins are Buddhist, the practice is nonsectarian. Mindfulness Meditation is deceptively simple, but requires dedicated practice. This *sutta* outlined sixteen practices, divided into four sets – the first focusing on awareness of body sensations, the second on awareness of feelings in the body, the third on awareness of mental states, and the last on awareness of various categories of our human experience. All sixteen practices are grounded in developing one’s awareness of breathing in and breathing out. The practice of Mindfulness Meditation is not limited to sitting meditation. The purpose of sitting is to strengthen our awareness of our mental processes so that we can be mindful regardless of what we are doing. To listen, when we are listening. To walk, when we are walking. To live, when we are living. To mediate, when we are mediating. To *be* fully and actually present, wherever we are physically present.¹¹ In other words, Mindfulness Meditation is training on how to live a reflective life and become a reflective practitioner.

Meditation has remained a practice over so many centuries, quite simply because it works. It is profoundly challenging to confront how our “monkey” minds – so named by meditation teachers because our minds often leap from thought to thought in response to external stimuli – control us. What we call “thinking” is far too often simply the reactive meanderings of this “monkey” mind. Clear, non-reactive, thoughtful analysis is rare, but it becomes more available the more we practice. As great masters of any art have discovered, it is our ability to master our own inner world that leads to external mastery.

Developmental Theme – A Reliable Steering Mechanism

Development over time is always the pathway to mastery, and development is thematic, not circumstantial. To allow development to occur in our lives with authenticity and intention, we must learn to see our lives thematically, rather than allow circumstances to determine our intentions and actions. Mostly, we react to, and are driven by, the circumstances that arise around us. Life sends us an event or our choices create an event, and we respond in some way to that event. These circumstances are not indicative of something wrong. They arise because the very nature of Life is constant change, and within that constant change lies the seeds of eventual and certain suffering.

One of the greatest false notions that our culture and particularly our educational system have foisted upon us is the idea that what we know and what we do with what we know define who we are. There is little emphasis, if any, placed on how or who we are *being*. This distinction between doing, knowing and *being* is fundamental to developing each of the personal qualities required to become our conversations and to mastering mediation. Thus, the willingness to *be* in development, always, is central to developing these personal qualities.

¹¹ Hanh, T.N. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975.

Focusing on the circumstances, on what we did wrong or right to create those circumstances, is a trap, a trap with room only for accidental development. As we develop self-awareness, we see the downside of that approach – being constantly pushed around by Life. Learning to hear the theme embedded in the circumstances we are facing and to steer our life by that theme leads to wisdom, freedom and, ultimately greater self-awareness. Themes dwell on a different level within our being, within our experiences. We learned, perhaps reluctantly, to look for themes in the novels and poems we read in school. We learned to listen for themes if we studied music. If we follow sports, we know that whatever gives rise to momentum at the right time in a contest is most often determinative of the winner. Themes resonate with the connected, integrated aspects of Life. They are the connective tissue that integrates our experience, informs our knowing, and illuminates our being.

For example, we could develop our skills as a mediator simply by taking on any case that comes to us. Early in our careers that may be our only choice. At some point, however, we see that our abilities serve better in a particular arena of conflict resolution. Perhaps we learn that we have a natural gift for working with just a few people or a certain type of case or only when we co-mediate. We then begin to use that “theme” to build our professional lives. An even more subtle and powerful refinement is when we observe, using reflective practice, that we often attempt to exercise too much control in our work or speak in a particular way that pushes others away, causing us to lose effectiveness. Based on such self-awareness, we can create a more specific and challenging developmental theme focusing on developing deeper awareness of these heretofore unconscious and self-defeating habits. We become more aware, more mindful. We forget. Life gives us a strong reminder. We develop more mindfulness in that area and find more success avoiding those destructive habits. We are living our life in development. We learn to open to the subtle rhythms and lessons of Life. Because we are striving for excellence in our field, we become more open to feedback, to learning from others, to recognizing that in this particular area, in fact, we do not know.

For example, at a certain level, Mozart steered his life by choosing to be a great musician. Unlike most of us, he made that life-defining choice at an early age and stuck with it. Then he steered his professional development, not just by his decision to play and write music, rather he steered his professional development by creating new forms for his music, by finding melodies through deeper and deeper listening to Life and other subtleties that expert musicologists have now studied for centuries.

The power of a theme in professional development is in the laser-like focus it provides. The more distinct our theme, the sharper our focus, the more challenging our development. Just as the decision to become a teacher provides a certain degree of focus, recognizing that we have an unconscious arrogance that pushes students away, and learning to focus on a theme around our arrogance in order to develop more connection with our students can provide tremendous focus. We can steer our lives by whatever happens to us circumstantially. We can steer our lives by a broad theme, such as being a mediator or a teacher or a parent. We can also steer our lives by a focused developmental theme that adds rigor and power to our professional development.

To bring healing into our work as conflict resolvers, we must learn to guide our work thematically, rather than circumstantially. To make this shift requires consistent practice in our daily lives. Developing the personal qualities required to become our conversations is a worthy theme by which to guide one's life.

Mastery

A woman once went to see Mahatma Gandhi and told him that her son was having a great deal of physical problems because he was addicted to eating sugar. She was greatly concerned with his health and asked Gandhi to tell her son to stop eating sugar. She said that she had asked him many, many times without success and said that her son had stopped listening to her. Gandhi replied, "OK, I will tell your son to stop eating sugar, but please come back in three days." As instructed, the woman returned in three days. Gandhi sat with her son for a long time and talked with him gently but clearly about the dangers to him of eating sugar, the love that his mother had for him, and finally asked the boy to stop. The boy promised Gandhi that he would. As they were leaving, the woman turned to Gandhi and said, "Sir, why did you ask us to return in three days? Why didn't you have this conversation with my son when we were here before?" Gandhi replied, "Because I had to stop eating sugar."

Copyright, G. Daniel Bowling, 2016. All rights reserved.