

Hakomi in My Life

(by Donna Martin)

I was recently asked to answer some questions about Hakomi and about mindfulness for a small journal published in Buenos Aires. I have answered the questions this way, and would like to share them with you.

About the importance of mindfulness practice in my life:

I would say that the practice of mindfulness has transformed my life. I can't even imagine what my life would look like without this practice. I began on a path of mindfulness over thirty-five years ago when I was introduced to yoga. Over the years I became a yoga teacher with a focus on the practice of yoga for self-awareness and personal liberation. It evolved into a daily practice of yoga postures, breathing, meditation, body awareness, and simple self-noticing that made the transition to the world of psychotherapy (and particularly the Hakomi Method) an easy and natural one. What mindfulness practice helps me to do, increasingly, is notice the sensations and impulses in my bodily experience, the congruent thoughts and memories in my mind, and the habitual attitudes that would shape my experience. In just noticing these, I am able to pause, reflect, and if necessary, replace them with ones that are more appropriate. This frees me from being hijacked by unnecessary emotions or impulses and allows me to be less reactive and more responsive in my life and in my relationships. I spend minimal time suffering emotionally or feeling blame, resentment, or hurt. I am essentially a happy person choosing, every day, to be happy.

About other Hakomi principles, including non-violence, unity, and organicity:

With regard to the other principles of Hakomi, there is also a natural integration of these into my life, and has been since I began to practice yoga. In yoga tradition, the principle of non-violence is called ahimsa. It relates to the first principle of both yoga and Hakomi, which is unity: everything is interconnected. Everything is part of a larger whole. If this is true, then hurting anything is hurtful to the whole... and to oneself as an integral part of that whole. To practice non-violence is to practice remembering wholeness, seeing interconnectedness everywhere, not separation, and paying attention (mindfulness) to anything that indicates, on the one hand, what is called for in a situation... what is really needed... and on the other hand, what is the effect of anything that I say or do... To practice mindfulness while remembering wholeness is to continually pay attention to how each action (or non-action) has a ripple effect, both outward and inward... and to continually adjust one's own actions to be in harmony with wholeness. The more I practice, the more I realize how many subtle signals I have been missing and how much more there is to be aware of in every moment. Only my trust in organicity allows me to stay calm and peaceful, to trust that even my consciousness or non-consciousness is also a part of a greater wholeness, and that things are "unfolding as they should"... at least they are unfolding as they are, and my responsibility is to practice paying attention (mindfulness) in order to be increasingly conscious and therefore, in the unity principle, increasingly compassionate and loving.

About what I would suggest for new therapists:

For new body-oriented therapists, I would recommend a daily practice of something like yoga or Feldenkrais or Tai Chi to learn to be continually grounded in bodily experience in a way that is non-judgmental and non-competitive and to practice mindfulness in bodily experience. There is no substitute for developing habits of self-noticing and body awareness that require several hours a week to cultivate. These habits will begin to operate outside of conscious awareness. They begin to organize one's experience and one's perceptions, allowing for the observations that will become a vital part of the therapeutic role. These practices also develop the kind of non-judgmental awareness that must be the context for a therapeutic relationship. One other practice which is fundamental to the role of therapist is the practice of what we call "loving presence", which is essentially a way of seeing anyone as a source of inspiration... seeing strengths, beauty, or something touching about another person, whoever they are. This can be practiced just by looking at strangers in a coffee shop, or with friends, family, and colleagues. It is a way of receiving the other person as if they are a gift. This practice also becomes a habitual way of being with others that is indispensable to therapists. One learns to be nourished by interactions with others, to see their strengths even when they are suffering, and to remember and trust in their wholeness rather than focus on their unwellness. For the therapist this is an essential way to avoid "burn-out". For clients, you become a mirror of the wholeness they are trying to remember.

And about the focus in Hakomi on going as directly as possible for a nourishing experience:

In regards to the Hakomi Method and the focus on nourishment: all the latest research on brain/mind development, learning, and psychotherapy indicates that it is the limbic system that organizes our emotional reactions and relationships. The limbic system operates on implicit memory, those attitudes and behaviours that have been learned implicitly from experience. Only new experience can change what has been learned through experience. (Read: *A General Theory of Love*, Thomas Lewis; *The Developing Mind*, Daniel Siegel) We also know that the nervous system doesn't know the difference between what is actually happening and what is being imagined (or remembered). So the nervous system continues to re-experience events that are being imagined (remembered, described, as in a therapy session.) Re-experiencing of painful events reinforces the beliefs and attitudes and behaviours they organize. This is not helpful. What is helpful to someone suffering from historical or imagined pain is to identify and provide new experiences to counteract the old... nourishing experiences to offer alternatives to the limitations and suffering caused by old stories and ideas. Therefore, in Hakomi, we want to identify, as soon as possible, the underlying (core) stories and beliefs based on painful experiences from the past (real or imagined). We want to get to them simply to get clear direction on exactly what kind of nourishment is needed. And then we want to spend as much time as possible, having identified the "missing experience", to make it possible for the client to have this experience and to begin to integrate it, emotionally, mentally, and physically. We know that the time spent experiencing some new kind of nourishment in a therapeutic situation creates a possibility for real change in someone's life. Whereas the time spent re-experiencing old hurts simply tends to reinforce the attitudes they created. So, in Hakomi, we move as

soon as possible in the direction of discovering what would be nourishing, and then experimenting with ways to create it as an experience for the client. We pay attention to signs of whether or not the client is actually being nourished and we adjust to make this more effective if necessary. We help them to integrate.

Here's an example: a client comes to group therapy with safety issues. The therapist notices the client's tendency to be "hyper-vigilant" and mistrustful... this is evident in the way the client holds her head at an angle, in her wide eyes, in her posture... The therapist recognizes that the client seems unable to relax and "let down her guard." An experiment is suggested... a possible experience of safety that would be a missing experience. She asks the client to select four people from the group to be her "guards"... like sentries they are positioned all around her looking outward, as if watching for her... she might ask them to say things like "I'm watching for you." With the sentries in place in exactly the way she needs them, the client just notices what her experience is. Typically, for the first time she can remember, she is able to relax and feel safe, to not need to be hypervigilant. Even if this is only temporary, it offers the possibility... sometimes, in some places, with some people, it is possible to feel safe enough to relax. It is new... a missing experience. If it is sustained for several minutes – at least fifteen – the person has a chance to really integrate the experience in her body and mind...

In conclusion:

The therapeutic relationship itself is probably the most healing ingredient of therapy. The fact that clients are experiencing someone (the therapist) relating to them differently than they have been related to before... without judgment, without hostility, paying attention with interest and with kindness, understanding, not criticizing, accepting and acknowledging, making space for their feelings, showing interest in a friendly way... all of this offers most clients their missing experience... the kind of safe attachment that human beings need from birth on in order to develop in a natural and healthy way. What clients come away with from good therapy is this experience of secure attachment, of being related to in a skillful and loving way. And along with this, if clients learn to be more aware of themselves, more in touch with the wisdom of the body, more able to notice their own impulses and needs, better able to express themselves and to respond instead of react, then their lives will be truly changed in a positive way.