

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

May 2023

Collaborative Dialogue as Mindfulness Practice

By Diane R. Gehart, Taos Institute Associate



Nearly three decades ago, I began my first doctoral program in Asian Language and Literature with the intention to become a Tibetan Buddhist scholar. However, I soon learned that there wasn't much of a job market and decided to switch to my backup plan: becoming a professor of psychotherapy. Luckily, I met Harlene Anderson and the Houston Galveston Institute faculty early in my training. Immediately, I knew I found my tribe because the concepts paralleled so much of the wisdom in Asian philosophies.

In my early years of training, I rarely discussed these connections. It wasn't until mindfulness became more mainstream that I explored these links more openly. In my recent edited book with Harlene, *Collaborative-Dialogic Practice: Relationships and Conversations that Make a Difference Across Contexts and Cultures* (Anderson & Gehart, 2023), I challenged myself to put these connections into words and was sincerely surprised with the results (Gehart, 2023). Teasing out the parallels highlighted the importance of the collaborative practitioner's *state of mind* and *focus* when doing this work.



Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). In traditional mindfulness meditation, the practitioner intentionally directs their attention to a single phenomenon in the present moment, such as one's breath, a sound, or physical sensation, while quieting their inner dialogue (Gehart, 2012, 2019). I believe the collaborative-dialogic practitioner engages in a similar process, but instead the focus of their present-moment awareness is the thread of meaning that emerges in conversation, which I call following the *breadcrumb trail* of meaning (Gehart, 2023).



The practitioner follows this breadcrumb trail by tracking how the client interprets the events they describe in conversation as well as tracking how meaning emerges moment-by-moment in conversation. For example, if a client is describing an argument with their boss, the practitioner is tracking the thread of logic that connects what each person said and did and what it meant to the client, without imposing the practitioner's own habits of interpretation. Tracking this unique thread of meaning requires intense discipline and sustained focus, which is very similar to the focus required for mindfulness meditation. In both cases, there is an intentional decision to lessen one's attention temporarily on one's own internal dialogue to focus elsewhere. Although we can never fully silence our inner filters,

we can become more aware of them and quiet them for short periods. Mindfulness reminds us of the discipline required to quiet the mind's innate tendency to evaluate everything. Finally, similar to

mindfulness meditation, it is a skill that even after a lifetime of practice, one never masters. Instead, each time one sits down—whether to meditate or dialogue—one is presented with a fresh set of previously unimagined possibilities and challenges that can only be experienced with compassionate awareness in the present moment.

Additional Resources

I invite you to learn more about C-D practices and mindfulness in *Collaborative Dialogic Practice: Relationships and Conversations Across Contexts and Cultures* (edited by Harlene and me) and enjoy a replay of our symposium in Fall 2022 at www.therapythatworksinstitute.com/CDPractices

References

- Anderson, H., & Gehart, D. (Eds.). (2023). *Collaborative-Dialogic Practice: Generative Relationships and Conversations across Contexts and Cultures*. Routledge.
- Gehart, D. (2012). *Mindfulness and acceptance in couple and family therapy*. Springer.
- Gehart, D. (2019). *Mindfulness for chocolate lovers: A lighthearted way to stress less and savor more each day*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gehart, D. R. (2023). Curiosity as mindfulness practice: Following the moment-to-moment unfolding of meaning construction. In Anderson, H. & Gehart, D. R. (Eds.), *Collaborative dialogic practice: Relationships and conversations that make a difference across contexts and cultures* (pp. 55-68). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003156260-5>.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144–156.