

Mindfulness and the Art of Living Creatively: Cultivating a Creative Life by Minding Our Mind

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This paper studies the role of mindful creativity in life and at work. It explores the relationship between mindfulness as a creative process and the concept of flow, suggesting that the Buddhist meditative practice of mindfulness contributes to the successful attainment of both of these experiences. It utilizes the Buddhist construct of mindfulness as a framework to approach the works of Langer, a Harvard psychologist, and Csikszentmihalyi, who pioneered the concept of flow. This author had the privilege of interviewing Csikszentmihalyi and Langer recently. For Langer, total engagement and immersion in everything done is the key to mindful creativity, which is very similar to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow as a state of effortless concentration and rapt enjoyment in an activity in which one loses any sense of space, time, and self. Both of these experiences, namely, mindfulness as a cognitive state and being in a state of flow, are characterized by energized engagement with the activity at hand with all of one's mind and attention, which is not dissimilar to how Theravada Buddhism understands and employs mindfulness.

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It is only when we've awakened that we realize how much of our lives we've actually slept through. (Langer, 2005, p. 16)

Of all human activities, creativity comes closest to providing the fulfillment we all hope to get in our lives. Call it full-blast living. Creativity is a central source of meaning in our lives. Most of the things that are interesting, important, and human are the result of creativity. What makes us different from apes—our language, values, artistic expression, scientific understanding, and technology—is the result of individual ingenuity that was recognized, rewarded, and transmitted through learning. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996b, pp. 1–2)

Introduction

It is generally believed that creativity is the province of a chosen few who are born with some special gift. It is often assumed that these individuals are endowed with innate talent that easily allows them to accomplish feats of creative output as a stroke of genius.

In the context of developing mindful creativity, Langer (2005) indicated that “creativity is not a blessing some special few are born with or receive from above. Our creative nature is an integral part of our daily lives, expressed through our culture, our language, and even our most mundane activities.” (p. 4). In a similar vein, research conducted by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) on optimal experience has shown how such creative moments occur through intentional effort and not just happen by chance: “The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its

limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult or worthwhile” (p. 3). Because heightened awareness is a common factor between both of these states, that is, mindful creativity and optimal performance, it can be surmised that the Buddhist meditative practice of mindfulness can facilitate Langer’s state of cognitive mindfulness as well as Csikszentmihalyi’s psychology of flow.

Mindfulness results in greater insight, receptivity, balance and clarity for oneself and others (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2003), as well as greater leadership presence and authenticity (Langer, 2005; Santorelli, 2000); ensures increased energy and sense of well-being and expands awareness and range of our responses (Kabat-Zinn & Santorelli, 2002); and results in increased life span, greater creativity, and lesser burnout (Langer, 1989).

In this paper, the researcher discusses the role of mindful creativity in life and at work. The researcher also explores the relationship between mindfulness as a creative process and the concept of “flow,” and suggests that the Buddhist meditative practice called mindfulness contributes to the successful attainment of both of these experiences. The researcher utilizes the Buddhist construct of mindfulness as a framework to approach the works of Langer, a Harvard psychologist, and Csikszentmihalyi, the celebrated author who popularized the concept of flow.

For Langer, total engagement and immersion in everything that one does is the key to mindful creativity, which is very similar to Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow as a state of effortless concentration and rapt enjoyment in an activity in which one loses any sense of space, time, and self. Both of these experiences, mindfulness as a cognitive state and being in a state of flow, are characterized by focused attention and energized engagement with the activity at hand with all of one’s mind, which is not dissimilar to how Theravada Buddhism understands and employs mindfulness. Thus, by using three different lenses, the researcher tries to understand the process of mindful creativity (Langer, 2005; Langer, personal communication, April 15, 2009) and the psychology of optimum experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1996a, 1997). The paper begins with a brief overview of the experience of flow as observed in the behavior of creative individuals and the anatomy of mindful creativity. It continues with a discussion of the contribution that mindfulness, as practiced within the framework of Theravada Buddhism, can make to enrich both paradigms.

Figure 1 explores the relationship among creativity, flow, and mindfulness. Alert attention, the hallmark of mindfulness, augurs both creativity and flow and in turn gets reinforced by both of them. And, as the figure shows, all three have salutary effect on workplace environment through mental and physical well-being of its employees.

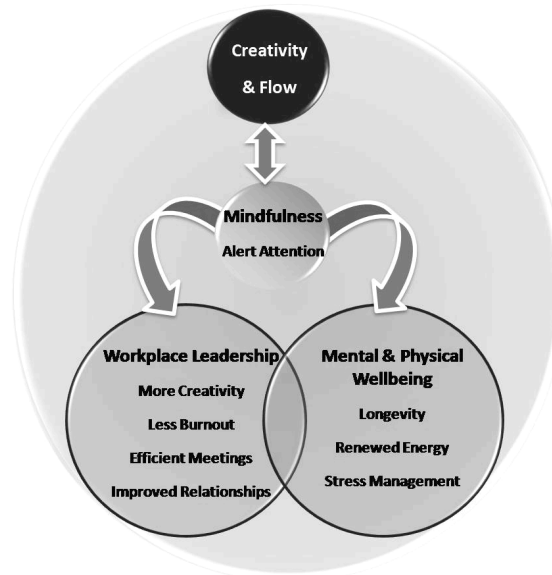


Figure 1: *Creativity, Flow, and Mindfulness*

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

Experiencing Flow

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has studied the psychology of optimal experiences, that is, flow, in various settings for the past 30 years. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow refers to a state of total immersion, effortless concentration, and rapt enjoyment in an activity in which one loses any sense of space, time, and self. First proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), flow is the mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, characterized by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997), flow represents a state in which the skills required to perform a particular task match the challenges presented by the task. The experience of flow is also described as being in the zone (athletes), ecstasy (mystics), and aesthetic rapture (artists and musicians), and it involves “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you’re using your skills to the utmost” (Cited in Geirland, 1996, p. 1).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identified the following key elements accompanying *flow*:

1. *A challenging activity that requires skills:* Flow occurs when we are performing tasks that are goal-directed, challenging and require the investment of psychic energy. Ultimately, how enjoyable an activity is depends upon the level of its complexity. If the task is too easy, it tends to lead to boredom; if it is too difficult, it may lead to anxiety and frustration. Flow occurs when the skill required to perform a task and the challenge presented by the task are balanced evenly.

2. *The merging of action and awareness:* Flow occurs when our awareness and action merge so completely that the activity becomes spontaneous; we stop being aware of ourselves being separate from the actions we are performing.
3. *Clear goals and immediate feedback:* Flow occurs when a person has clear set of goals that require appropriate response. Clear goals and immediate feedback help our involvement with flow experiences to occur naturally.
4. *Concentration on the task at hand:* Flow activities require a complete focusing of attention at hand—thus leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information. “By learning to concentrate,” says Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p. 28), “a person acquires control over psychic energy, the basic fuel on which all thinking depends.”
5. *The paradox of control:* The flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control—or, more precisely, lacking the sense of worry about losing control.
6. *The loss of self-consciousness:* During flow activities we become so engrossed or immersed in the task at hand that we lose any consciousness of self. When not preoccupied with our own selves we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are.
7. *Transformation of the sense of time:* One of the most important features of flow experience is that our sense of time is transformed: hours seem to pass by in minutes—time flies, when we are having fun.

Csikszentmihalyi’s Comments on the Behavior of Creative People

Based upon 30 years of research on how creative people devise new ideas and new things, Csikszentmihalyi (1996a) noted:

Creative individuals are remarkable for their ability to adapt to almost any situation and to make do with whatever is at hand to reach their goals. If I had to express in one word what makes their personalities different from others, it’s *complexity*. They show tendencies of thought and action that in most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes; instead of being an “individual,” each of them is a “multitude.” (p. 1)

Csikszentmihalyi (1996a, 1996b) discusses the following 10 antithetical, seemingly paradoxical traits of creative people in his book, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*:

1. Creative individuals have a great deal of physical energy, but they are also often quiet and at rest.
2. Creative individuals tend to be smart, yet also naïve at the same time.
3. A third paradoxical trait refers to the related combination of playfulness and discipline, or responsibility and irresponsibility.
4. Creative individuals alternate between imagination and fantasy at one end, and a rooted sense of reality at the other.
5. Creative people seem to harbor opposite tendencies on the continuum between extroversion and introversion.
6. Creative individuals are also remarkably humble and proud at the same time.
7. Creative individuals to a certain extent escape the rigid gender role stereotyping.
8. Generally, creative people are thought to be rebellious and independent.
9. Most creative persons are very passionate about their work, yet they can be extremely objective about it as well.

10. Finally, the openness and sensitivity of creative individuals often exposes them to suffering and pain yet also a great deal of enjoyment (pp. 58–73).

In the last chapter of his book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, based on interviews with 91 creative individuals, Csikszentmihalyi (1996b) offered some practical suggestions for enhancing creativity. Following are a few tips that have special relevance from the standpoint of creativity and mindfulness:

1. Try to be surprised by something every day.
2. Try to surprise at least one person every day.
3. Write down each day what surprised you and how you surprised others.
4. Wake up in the morning with a specific goal to look forward to.
5. When something strikes a spark of interest, follow it.
6. If you do anything well, it becomes enjoyable.
7. To keep enjoying something, you need to increase its complexity.
8. Make time for reflection and relaxation.
9. Find out what you like and what you hate about life.
10. Start doing more of what you love, less of what you hate.
11. Shift often from openness to closure.
12. Find a way to express what moves you.
13. Look at problems from as many viewpoints as possible.
14. Have as many different ideas as possible.
15. Try to produce unlikely ideas (pp. 347–370).

Langer's Comments on Becoming an Artist

Langer (2005) stated that “all it takes to become an artist is to start doing the art” (p. xv). She further avers that if we are mindfully creative, “the circumstances of the moment will tell us what to do” (p. 35). Through research and skillful logic, she demonstrated how people undervalue themselves and impede their creativity. Langer, who considered mindful creativity as necessary condition to mindful living, commented, “The more we engage in our mindful activity, the closer we get to living a mindful life. By living a life full of art, we may achieve an artful life” (p. 229). Langer went on to explain how mindful art helped her to organize ideas for her book. She stated, “It was like having closed floor full of clothes in need of hangers. My art provided a way to get the clothes off the floor, so to speak” (pp. 229–230).

According to Carson and Langer (2006), “The goal of the mindful perspective is to increase cognitive flexibility and to thereby increase behavioral flexibility and the ability to adapt to one’s current environment in a meaningful manner. Empirical evidence spanning four decades attests to the beneficial effects of a mindful vs. mindless perspective” (p. 1).

Within the context of mindfulness, these researchers pointed out the importance of authenticity, the tyranny of evaluation, the benefits of mistakes, the mindlessness of social comparison, and the trap of rigid categories. One of the simplest and most natural methods of reducing self-evaluation is to assume a mindset of mindfulness rather than mindlessness (Langer, 1989). Langer (2005) shared her deep conviction that each person is capable of achieving personal renaissance, the essence of which is “to learn to act and engage with ourselves mindfully, creatively, actively, and happily

(p. 21). Mindfulness serves as the basis for personal transformation. For Langer (2005), mindfulness and creativity are natural partners. She shared insights on removing the roadblocks that stand in the way of our awakening and presents following insights on harnessing artistic creativity:

1. **Life of Mindful Creativity.** Our creative nature is an integral part of our daily life and mindful creative activities hold the key to living meaningful, fulfilled lives. Mindfulness, according to Langer (2005) is “an effortless, simple process that consists of drawing novel distinctions or noticing new things” (p. 5). “It is seeing the similarities in things thought different and the differences in things taken to be similar” (p.16). Langer found out two ways in which people teach themselves to be mindless: (1) through repetition, certain activities become second nature to us and we carry them mindlessly, as if on an autopilot. We just have to give up our fixed ways in which we have learned to look at the world and develop a beginner’s approach to life; and (2) using a single frame of reference.
2. **Becoming Authentic.** Langer’s research has shown that “when people are coached to be more mindful in a situation, those around them are likely to see them as more charismatic and more genuine” (p. 25). She quotes Henry Ward Beecher stating that “every artist dips his brush in his own soul, and paints his own nature into pictures” (p. 36). Manet spent his life producing “sincere art.” Langer calls it “mindful art” (p. 40).
3. **The Tyranny of Evaluation.** According to Langer, tyranny of evaluation is the “most important roadblock we need to overcome to achieve personal renaissance. The most common reason we hesitate when presented with an opportunity to express ourselves creatively is our fear of other people’s negative opinions” (p. 43). We need to remind ourselves that evaluations are context-dependent, and no one evaluation fits all contexts. One of the best ways mindfulness counters the tyranny of evaluation is to realize that “unquestioningly accepting single-minded evaluation of what we notice is mindless” (p. 58).
4. **The Mindfulness of Mistakes.** Langer opines that mistakes encourage mindfulness. If we are attentive to our mistakes they help us tune into the present and allow us explore novel courses of action. Langer points out that “Mistakes, like evaluations, are context based. In one context, a mistake is an error, while in another it can be a surprise advantage” (p. 76). She reminds us that we should learn from Robert Frost, the great American poet. When the poems that he wrote did not work to his satisfaction, he called them “exercises.”
5. **The Rule of Absolutes.** Langer argues that we tend to create rules and absolutes and then try to apply them mindlessly to our own detriment. After all, “rules are, by their very nature, mindless limitations on our attention to the context in which we do things” (p. 103). Langer quotes Ansel Adams, stating, “There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs.” By becoming more mindful about the genesis of the rules—by asking such questions as when was the rule made, by whom, under what context, etc.—we move from being rule-governed to being rule-guided.
6. **Mindlessness of Social Comparisons.** According to Langer, the main reason we do not engage the world more creatively is that “we mindlessly compare ourselves with other people we deem highly creative and we come up short” (p. 130). Although to compare is natural human tendency, we should remember that most social comparisons set us up for future unhappiness because there will always be someone who will be better in some respect than we are. We will benefit a lot if we keep in mind the contextual influences that contribute to others people’s perceived “greatness” and not just their talent.

7. **Myth of Talent.** Langer notes that the problem with accepting the conventional idea of talent as being *normally* distributed is that, “if we find ourselves on the wrong end of the curve, we just assume we don’t have what it takes” (pp. 171–172). Langer speaks about our exaggerated sense of other people’s talent. She points out that in making comparisons, the gap between talented people and us widens because we tend to focus on the end results of their efforts and ignore the “struggles, uncertainties and false starts” (p. 150). She notes that it may be that the “real difference between those we think of as talented and ourselves may be nothing more than their willingness to go forward in the face of the uncertainty, if only because they believe in the skills they know they can bring to bear” (p. 150).
8. **Blindness of Knowing.** Pointing out that our very familiarity with an object leads to a mindless approach to its reality, Langer insightfully states: “The opportunity for creating new choices for ourselves comes only when we are open to noticing the very differences that work against this tendency” (p. 175). She gives several examples of cases when we are *looking but not seeing*, such as picking out a picture that most looks like a penny from among several pictures that look like a penny. She goes on to remark that there is a good deal of research that shows how poor eyewitness accuracy is and that confidence and accuracy are not correlated: “People may be absolutely sure of what they have seen, and they may be wrong” (p. 182). She notes that ‘openness to different points of views is an important aspect of being mindfully creative.’ And then with Zen-like simplicity, she concludes: “To play an instrument, all you need to learn is to hear it” (p. 190).
9. **From Reference to Preference.** Langer presents an important aspect of her approach in this section: Taking notice of things expands our appreciation of them. The more we engage with unfamiliar things, the more likely we will get to like them. She contends that her research so far has revealed that “rather than breeding contempt, familiarity breeds liking” (p. 203). This is called the “mere exposure effect” is social psychology: “seeing something over and over again increases our liking for it” (p. 204). Langer believes that “the more distinctions we draw, the more we see into the essence of something” (p. 203). It is our mindful engagement with the world that leads us to enjoy the world and “to be mindfully engaged is the most effortless, natural, and creative state we can be in” (p. 211).
10. **Mindful Choice.** Langer points out that when it comes to making choices, we need to remember an important point: “Certainty breeds mindlessness.... If we do not run from it, uncertainty promotes mindfulness” (pp. 223–224). Then in almost Buddhist vein, she goes on to remark: “Inasmuch as we confuse the stability of our mind-sets with the stability of the underlying phenomenon, there is uncertainty whether we choose to acknowledge it or not” (p. 225).

Following is the essence of Langer’s (2005) message:

Our fear of making mistakes, our belief that we have no talent, and our comparisons with others all keep us from engaging in any creative activity (p. 210).... The more we engage our mindful creativity, the closer we get to living a mindful life (p. 229).... Mindful creativity can turn our lives troubled by boredom and loneliness into lives that are rich and exciting.... Thus, creative engagement makes us like ourselves and other better, improving our overall happiness and even our health. (p. 194)

The Practice of Mindfulness

Mindfulness refers to a special form of awareness or presence of mind. Although one is always aware to some degree, this awareness rarely goes beyond the surface level to reach the mind's deeper layers (Gunaratana, 2002). However, with the practice of mindfulness, the normal awareness or attentiveness is applied with greater intensity and "at a special pitch" (Bodhi, 1994, p. 70). Bodhi (1994), a renowned Buddhist scholar-monk, explained the practice of right mindfulness as follows:

The mind is deliberately kept at the level of *bare attention*, a detached observation of what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. In the practice of right mindfulness the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event. All judgments and interpretations have to be suspended, or if they occur, just registered and dropped.... To practice mindfulness is thus a matter not so much of doing but of undoing: not thinking, not judging, not associating, not planning, not imagining, not wishing. All these "doings" of ours are modes of interference, ways the mind manipulates experience and tries to establish its dominance. (p. 76)

Underscoring its universal importance, Buddha observed, "Mindfulness, I declare, is helpful everywhere" (as cited in Khantipalo, 1986, p. 8). The Buddha described *sati* as the ability to remember, that is, to be aware of what one is doing in the movements of the body, in the movements of mind:

And what is the faculty of *sati*? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, highly meticulous, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. He remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves...the mind in & of itself...mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. (SN 48:10, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

Although, the Pali word *sati* originally meant memory or remembrance, in its general Buddhist usage, it has been mostly employed to denote a certain quality of attentiveness or awareness of the present that the Buddhist doctrine specifies as good, wholesome, skillful, or right. It is not just bare attention that is referred to here; rather, it is appropriate or wholesome attention, denoted by the Pali word *yonisomaniskara*. Buddhist psychology identifies three unwholesome tendencies of mind: greed, hatred and ignorance. If attention emanates from any of these three unwholesome tendencies, then it is not appropriate and will not provide one with knowledge of reality as it truly is. Used in this sense, it is called *samma-sati*, or right mindfulness, and forms the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path (Nyanaponika, 1962).

Concluding Thoughts

It seems likely that Csikszentmihalyi and Langer agreed that to enjoy this felicitous state of creative fulfillment or flow, one has to achieve certain measure of awareness regarding the contents of one's consciousness. Mindfulness as a meditative practice can help tremendously in raising the awareness level of the contents of the mind. By being mindfully aware of one's inner and outer world, one

notices new things, which in turn helps one to become more creative and alive. Thus, mindfulness can serve as a basis of creativity, flow, and meaningful engagement with life in its myriad manifestations. And when mindfulness matures into right mindfulness, that is, by minding a mind that is free from greed, hatred, or delusion, one can experience the flow of existence with generosity, compassion, and wisdom.

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