



Atmospherics

Reaching Another Level in Mindfulness-Based Teaching

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**Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?**

... T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* (lines 359-365)

An Atmospheric Agenda

1. Why don't we talk about it?
2. How might we talk about it?
3. What does it offer to teachers?
4. Is it useful in the "real" world

1. Why don't we talk about it?

- We just don't see it
- We have been looking through lenses of empirical research
- The focus is individualist and reductionist
- Yet, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

2. How can we talk about it?

- The recent emergence of an ethical critique gives us a start
- Aristotle says that as a category of philosophy ethics is extremely imprecise
- It is like trying to analyze the MBP atmosphere
- He uses the term *poiesis* to describe the ethical situation—*artful making*
- We can use language of ethics and aesthetics













Gratuitous beauty and justice

- We're simply adding a third partner to a dance of two that we've been watching for years
- The one-to-one relations expand to the total of relationships in the moment
- Aristotle: people of virtuous character gathered in the moment co-create beauty and justice
- An atmosphere that encourages the flourishing of the community

3. What does it offer to teachers?

- A relational constructionist discourse reflects the radical interdependence of participants and teachers that comprises atmosphere
- **Confluence:** not a collection of bounded individuals choosing to act, but coordinated action defined in the moment
- This concept is so contrary to our typical view, that we have no words for it

Perichoresis



“O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

Bringing the group together

- **Negotiation:** co-creation of shared realities, and the comfort, reliability, and trust that accompany them
- **Narrative:** changing a story about **me** into a story of **we**
- **Enchantment:** language, ritual, and emotion can generate a sense of transcendent importance of the group

Bringing the group together

- Tightly bonded groups are dangerous—we know this all too well
- But the atmosphere of the MBPs is unique
- Bonding is strong enough to offer the sense of home, yet weak enough not to threaten those who live outside—or who dissent from inside
- So, what is it that we co-create? And how?

DOING DIMENSION

**Corporeality
Cosmopolitanism
Contingency**

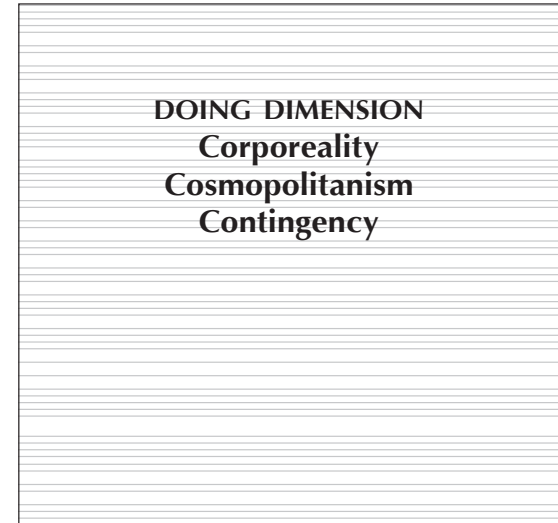
NON-DOING DIMENSION

**Non-Pathologizing
Non-Instrumental
Non-Hierarchical**

FRIENDSHIP

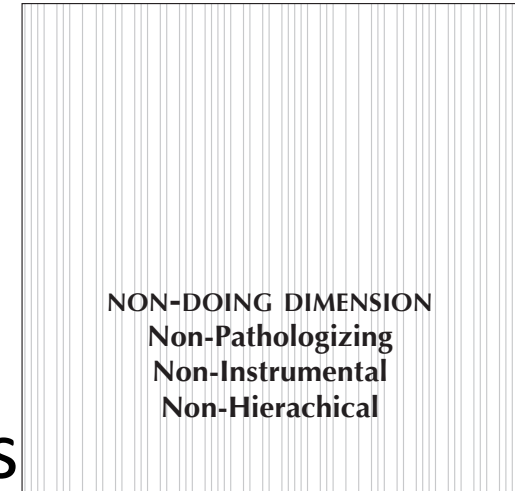
What we are doing

- **Corporeality:** foregrounds the experience of the body
- **Contingency:** deconstructs experiences, particularly those that are difficult to tolerate.
- **Cosmopolitanism:** holds the meaning that is created in the moment, without commentary, correction, or critique



What we are not doing

- **Non-Pathologizing:** replaces participants' limited diagnostic identities with unlimited possibilities
- **Non-Hierarchical:** no one knows how it will be, for anyone
- **Non-Instrumental:** it's not about trying for a particular experience, but about being friendly with the one you're having



Defining Home

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.”

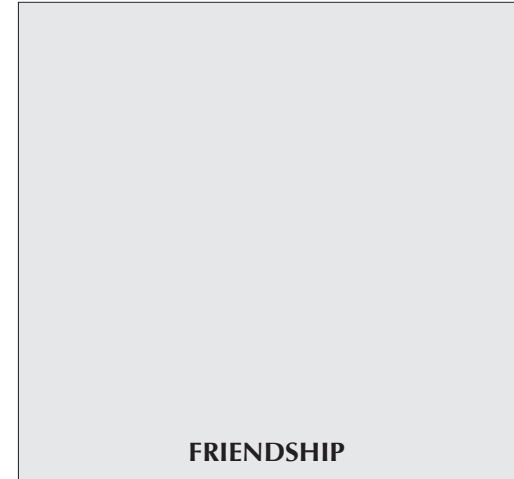
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“I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve.”

...From Robert Frost, “The Death of a Hired Man”

It's the quality of the atmosphere

- **Friendship:** Participants in the confluence feel the support that allows them to turn toward and be with/in their experience of the moment
- This is not simply theoretical, nor is it merely physiological—it's a relational accomplishment



OK, but what is it good for?

- We **steep** in many different confluences, many different atmospheres, throughout our lives
- So, we are imbued with a repertoire of ways of being, or **potentials**
- These potentials are part of our **multi-being**, and are available as needed and appropriate
- Steeping in an MBP atmosphere imbues participants with know-how to create it again

Could we measure it?

- **The Sublime** connects through facing a fearful prospect together—it is the turning towards and being with of our practice
- **The Beautiful** brings us closer together as we agree on the pleasure of an experience—it is the easy route
- But, without the sublime, the atmosphere has little power to imbue us with know-how

Could we measure it?

- The liturgy of Greek tragic drama: citizens of the community gather to reaffirm the solidarity of the city —the capacity to be together for the good of all
- Contemplative immobilization in assigned seats makes each one recognize their own separateness and see the otherness of the one undergoing the tragedy
- They see the other's full humanity, and their own
- The recognition of mutual separateness, paradoxically, creates solidarity—an ethical community to steep in

4. Is it useful in the “real” world?

- That’s certainly worth thinking about
- Maybe that can be part of what we do tonight in the panel discussion?
- Right now, however, what are you thinking about atmosphere?