MINDFULNESS AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

In the mid-1990’s I read Daniel Goleman’s book “Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ”. It drew my attention because of my career as a psychotherapist, but also because I was already familiar with his work as an influential authority on the intersection between Westerns psychology and Buddhism. When I read the book, I was surprised to note that there is no reference at all to mindfulness meditation or Buddhism in the book. As a well-informed student of both disciplines, I read “between the lines” of the book and understood how the two forms intersect, and applied the concepts described in the book to my efforts to help clients. Subsequently, Goleman wrote about the same topic in different areas of life: “Working With Emotional Intelligence” and “Social Intelligence”. Subsequently, he has organized various programs and studies to develop the discipline of emotional intelligence around the world.

My intention with this Dharma talk is to review the characteristics of emotional intelligence, the corollary attributes of Buddhist concepts and practices, and how one’s lifestyle is benefitted through the cultivation of these capabilities.

First, a brief history of the concept of emotional intelligence. I found this quote in Wikipedia:

“In 1983, Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* introduced the idea that traditional types of intelligence, such as IQ, fail to fully explain cognitive ability. He introduced the idea of multiple intelligences which included both *interpersonal intelligence* (the capacity to understand the intentions, motivations and desires of other people) and *intrapersonal intelligence* (the capacity to understand oneself, to appreciate one's feelings, fears and motivations).

In total, Gardner proposed nine manifestations of intelligence: *Naturalistic, Musical, Logical–mathematical, Existential, Interpersonal, Linguistic, Bodily–kinesthetic, Intra–personal* and *Spatial intelligence*. Later researchers have been critical of these designations; my reference to them creates a context for Goleman’s work and these notes, whether they can be scientifically validated or not. During the time Goleman was writing the book he was a Science Editor for the New York Times, so he would have been tasked with reviewing this research for the newspaper; I imagine his understanding of mindfulness meditation perceived a “good fit” between Buddhist concepts and practices and the concept of emotional intelligence. As indicated in the above quote, the areas of special interest for this talk are inter- and intrapersonal intelligence. These characteristics became designated as EQ, intended to convey equivalence to the term IQ, the long-standing reference to cognitive analytical capabilities, known as the Intelligence Quotient, comparable to the already familiar IQ, Intelligence Quotient.

A basic premise of Goleman’s work is that, even though someone might register on the genius scale with IQ, their ability to succeed in life depended more on the ability to manifest EQ, and sociological research focusing on the success of corporate or scientific individuals bears this out—a person of moderate IQ is more likely to achieve professional success if they also manifest EQ characteristics, compared to a person of genius IQ and low EQ capabilities. I would assume that having a higher level EQ would also benefit someone’s success with other forms of intelligence as well, especially Existential Intelligence, which is described as intelligent inquiry regarding the meaning of life.

There are five functions that characterize emotional intelligence, according to Goleman’s book:

**Self-awareness** – the ability to know one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, drives, values and goals and recognize their impact on others while using gut feelings to guide decisions.

**Self-regulation** – involves controlling or redirecting one's disruptive emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances.

**Social skill** – managing relationships to get along with others.

**Empathy** – considering other people's feelings especially when making decisions.

**Motivation** – being aware of what motivates them.

The primary application of EQ has been the application of these competencies in corporate management settings. Obviously, EQ is beneficial in many areas of one’s life, and this is the intention involved in this talk. Even though EQ has mostly been studied regarding professional success, the principles apply to any sort of endeavor, particularly regarding family systems.

Here is a more expansive review of how the regular cultivation of mindfulness meditation establishes and sustains emotional intelligence, particularly as these capabilities are associated with Right Speech, Right Action and Right Lifestyle:

**Self-awareness:** Self-awareness is a primary goal of mindfulness meditation practice, along with self-regulation. How does this practice cultivate self-awareness? During a recent Dharma talk, I reviewed how mindfulness of breathing meditation restructures the neurophysiology and functionality of the brain, and, by extension, a person’s behavioral capabilities. The talk was posted on March 1, 2023, titled "Reviewing How Mindfulness of Breathing Operates”. The strengthening of connections between key neural networks in the brain provides ongoing process awareness of cognitive and physical experience and these changes facilitate how a person’s body is affected by the stream of sensations that stimulate us all. The ability to identify one’s stream of thoughts as transitory, impersonal fabrications of neural activity minimizes the felt need to either defend or gratify the demands of the ego. This more flexible and adaptive affective response set is associated with the next function of emotional intelligence:

**Self-regulation:** As reviewed during the above-mentioned Dharma talk, consciously tracking processes associated with awareness of affective/emotional responses enhances the ability to regulate their “signal strength”—how feelings drive cognitive and behavioral responses. Every time attention is disengaged from a maladaptive emotional/behavioral response through consciously redirecting attention back to the affective neutrality of breath sensational awareness, self-regulation is enhanced. This is a manifestation of what Buddhism terms Right Effort—the discarding of irrelevant or unwholesome affective responses and the nurturing of relevant and wholesome responses. The ability to regulate emotional processes is key to the ability to effective decision-making and interpersonal conflict resolution, an important component of the next element of EQ.

**Social skill:** Social skill is closely associated with and relies on the ability to be self-aware and self-regulated, while “reading” the speech and accompanying behavioral cues of another person or group. We assume that we understand another solely through verbal communication, but contemporary research suggests that we also are processing visual stimulation as well. All these stimuli arrive in the brain as perceptual impressions. We are flooded with all sorts of sensory stimulation; perception involves separating one part of the array of stimulation from the rest, and then other parts of the brain begin to elaborate meaning based on how those perceptions are associated with prior experience. Mindfulness and Investigation of Mental Phenomena, two of the seven Awakening Factors, operate to maximize social skills, based on the ethical guidelines described as Right Speech and Right Action. These capabilities are aligned with self-regulation—Right Effort. Social skills involve careful listening, timing of responses and the ability to be adaptive regarding the flow of interpersonal events, to further one’s goals.

**Empathy:** Effective and appropriate consideration regarding another person's emotional states builds upon self-awareness and self-regulation and is closely integrated with the operation of social skills. On January 18 and 25, 2023, the topics of the Dharma talks involved reviews of Compassion and Sympathetic Joy, both of which are skillful interpersonal processes that build upon the natural human capacity for empathy. Current research investigates how mindfulness meditation can improve the ability to be aware of empathy and shape responses to the “vibe” of interpersonal interactions that are personally and professionally beneficial. Leadership benefits from the ability to “read the room” and therefore be more skillful in negotiating toward achieving a goal.

**Motivation:** Understanding and working effectively with motivation is a core element of Buddhist practice. The word *cetana* (chey-tah-nah) represents *intention* and *motivation* in Buddhist psychology; it is considered to affect every moment of consciousness and behavior. The ability to monitor how intentions are manifesting self-organizing functions and be able to manage these impulses skillfully is a very important capability to develop. One of the benefits of the application of self-awareness and self-regulation is the ability to effectively manage normal human impulsive reactivity (Known as craving/clinging from a Buddhist perspective) and organized responses based on virtue—Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. It is becoming more clear that organizations, from a familial to a corporate level, benefit greatly from the ability to develop wholesome social norms.

On page 259 of Goleman’s book, he describes the skill sets of emotional intelligence:

The emotional skills include self-awareness; identifying, expressing, and managing feelings; impulse control and delaying gratification; and handling stress and anxiety. A key ability in impulse control is knowing the difference between feelings and actions, and learning to make better emotional decisions by first controlling the impulse to act, then identifying alternative actions and their consequences before acting. Many competencies are interpersonal: reading social and emotional cues, listening, being able to resist negative influences, taking others’ perspectives, and understanding what behavior is acceptable in a situation.

**Applications of EQ in a variety of settings**

Here are potential applications of the original designations of EQ as described by Gardner, keeping in mind that the psychological validity of these capabilities is not being defended, but rather that these suggestions provide opportunities to explore different ways a person might understand her or his personality:

**Naturalistic:** This sort of personality has a high degree of interest in how organisms and other natural systems operate. A person might be interested in biology or geology, for example. In order to develop professionally, either through formal education or simply through immersing oneself in a natural environment, the ability to be self-aware and self-regulated would be useful to avoid distractions while studying or even while immersing oneself in a natural environment. Social skills might not be as important as would be the case in other areas of interest, but the ability to negotiate successfully for resources or with indigenous persons would require empathy and social skills. The ability to maintain motivation would be important, either as persistent alertness in the wilderness or as the ability to maintain academic studies in an ongoing way.

**Musical:** Musical ability is an innate potential we all share, whether involving making music or simply enjoying it. Some of us are drawn to singing or playing an instrument through the influence of role models or a realization of the joy of creating a musical tone or rhythm. In any case, the ability to motivate oneself to train for proficiency requires self-awareness and self-regulation. I often compare developing the craft of mindfulness to the craft of musicianship—both are skillsets that build upon one’s motivations to be more competent. One of the prerequisites for developing successful musical skills requires the ability to set aside distractions and practice, practice, practice! To sing or play an instrument in a group requires some degree of empathy and social skill.

**Logical-Mathematical:** This capability is perhaps more genetically based, but the extent to which one experiences success depends on self-awareness and self-regulation—the ability to stay on task while solving a mathematical theorem requires motivation and discipline. Empathy and social skills are not inherently important for solving mathematical problems, but the ability to be successful professionally requires some ability to negotiate interpersonally.

**Existential:** This capability is within the realm of philosophy and spiritual inclinations. The desire for spiritual fulfillment is considered to be embedded in each person from birth. However, like musical capability, one has to be motivated, self-aware and self-regulated to develop this to any high degree of proficiency. The ability to effectively communicate through both listening and speaking requires empathy and social skills, is important for professional success, and motivation for study and self-inquiry is a fundamental requirement.

**Interpersonal:** This involves a high level of empathy and social skill development for success. Of course, self-awareness and self-regulation are also essential. Motivation is required to overcome interpersonal conflict in regard to what is the desired outcome of an interpersonal encounter—to debate effectively, or to grow more trust and confidence in relationships. This capability is necessary for cultivating oneself as a leader.

**Linguistic:** This is another innate capacity, that of mastering a dialect within a language. Some folks have familial motivation for being multilingual, while others must develop the capacity to communicate for professional success. Linguistic skill also involves the ability to speak convincingly, as a teacher, a politician or an actor. Self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills are also part of achieving success linguistically.

**Bodily-Kinesthetic:** This is the world of athleticism, either as a dancer, a model, or in sports. We all have to be somewhat self-aware and self-regulated to be able to walk upright, but the degree to which one develops a high degree of strength, balance and flexibility that is required to be successful requires training. I recall a book entitled “The Inside Game of Tennis”, which proposed that developing oneself professionally as a tennis player requires the ability to find the right balance between the exciting energy of competition and the ability to “stay cool” during a high-stakes tennis tournament. This, of course, is self-awareness and self-regulation. The ability to effectively negotiate sponsorship, coaching or other interpersonal resources relies on empathy and social skills. Of course, to be successful it is necessary to delay gratification and develop high degrees of motivation while training towards proficiency.

**Intra-personal:** Once again, this is the quintessential arena that involves spiritual attainment, Buddhism, in this case. All the elements of EQ apply here. The ability to be self-aware, self-regulating, and motivated are required for effective cultivation mindfulness meditation. Sangha, one’s spiritual community, supports the development of empathy and social skills.

**Spatial:** This is the realm of 3-dimensional art, architecture, and general structural engineering. The ability to imagine something and then make in manifest requires the ability to be self-aware regarding how things fit together, the ability to be motivated and self-regulated in constructing objects and the ability to negotiate for necessary materials and resources requires empathy and social skills.

I created these scenarios to prompt your thinking about how EQ applies to your life. You might think that your life doesn’t relate to these descriptions. I am retired, but the principles and practices that will determine my success as a “professional human being” in retirement will still benefit from considering the concepts that apply to emotional intelligence. How do you want to live? What about your physical and social well-being? How about your approach to yourself as a consumer? These issues are all withing the realm of EQ.