



CONTEMPLATIVE CONCORDANCE WITH CREATIVITY

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Abstract. The paper takes cudgels against the view that contemplative practices are not conducive for creativity. Since contemplative practices often require discipline and controlling the tendency of mind to wander from one thought to another, the received wisdom often militates against giving any place for contemplative practices in nurturing creativity. At the same time there are studies indicating how practices such as mindfulness enhance creativity. This paper argues that this paradox concerning the relationship between contemplative approaches and creativity can be resolved by looking into the role that open attention and passivity play in facilitating creativity. Engaging in non-judgmental open attention can be conducive for nurturing the beneficial aspects of mind wandering. The paper concludes by suggesting that making our attention more in the open, receptive mode can nurture, what is called, the creative mode of life.

Keywords: contemplative traditions, creativity, leisure, open attention, passivity.

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1. Introduction

Creativity plays a key role in human life. It is commonly understood as anything novel and effective or useful (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). At its basic form, it is essential for satisfactorily dealing with the environment, given the uncertainty of the environment. Though, like other animals, humans are wired to react in certain ways, there is still plenty of scope for creative response. Creativity is pervasive in human life and amounts to an important cognitive activity.

This paper is primarily a philosophical attempt to challenge the view that contemplative practices are not conducive for creativity because the latter heavily relies upon spontaneous thinking whereas the former tries to check the meanderings of the mind. We seek to accomplish this by showing the connection between passivity and creativity and argue that some central aspects of passivity can be nurtured in mindfulness practice such as open attention or choiceless awareness. Passivity here is understood as an aspect of agency because both acting and receiving are important as far as agency in the real world is concerned. In other words, passivity is not a matter of resignation to whatever comes but an active state of acceptance without making judgments or evaluation of whatever is received.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the second section, we briefly discuss the habits of some highly creative individuals and show that leisure or rest plays an important role in creative process. Subsequently, we try to explain how leisure plays a significant role in creative process by appealing to mind wandering. In the third section, we shall discuss how contemplative traditions fare *vis-à-vis* creativity. Since meditation is often aimed at checking

mind wandering it is often claimed that meditation and creativity may not go together. At the same time there is evidence suggesting that certain forms of mindfulness practice help in creativity. In the fourth section, we shall try to resolve this paradox by drawing on the difference between narrow and open attention. We shall argue that mindfulness is not always antithetical to mind wandering. On the other hand, certain aspects of mindfulness practice such as choiceless awareness can preserve what is conducive in mind wandering for creativity. Further, we discuss the possibility that engaging in open, diffused attention will help in making everyday living more and more creative.

2. Passivity and creativity

The life styles of highly creative people have been documented extensively. It is widely known that Albert Einstein was versatile with this piano and used to sleep for almost ten hours a day including short naps during daytime. Further he had regular walking habits too. Ernest Hemingway, one of the celebrated writers of the twentieth century, had a particular way of practicing writing and work; he only wrote at one specific time of day, and at other times he got engaged with other things. This practice gives him new energy and ideas to continue his work. He preferred to rest after a certain point and stop writing when things were in control at the right moment.

Similar habits are seen in the life of many creative persons. It is pointed out that many highly creative people like Charles Dickens, Henry Poincaré, Charles Darwin, Godfrey Harold Hardy, and others arranged their time in such a way that actual conscious time they spent on their projects was as low as four to five hours a day (Soojung-Kim Pang, 2016). Rest of the time they ended up spending in such a way that facilitated creative outcomes. It can be taking a walk or a nap or even just sitting and letting the mind do its job. For an external observer the amount of hard work they did was not high but their contributions to their fields was outstanding by any standard.

2.1. Stages of creativity

What the above discussion indicates is that creativity is not simply a matter of more and more effort but involves things that are subtler than overt effort. This is indicated by the famous division of creativity into four stages by Wallas (1926): 1) preparation; 2) incubation; 3) illumination; 4) and verification. As per his model, creativity starts with some kind of action, called preparation. It is a knowledge-gathering process that is conscious and closely engages with the thought system. At the same time, incubation is an unconscious stage that sets mental work in a relaxed mode. For small problems this stage may last only for a short duration but for large difficult problems incubation can be much longer. Illumination happens when solution bursts into consciousness suddenly. Verification is also conscious; subjects have total control of action in this stage. In a way, subjects go back to the preparation stage during verification (Sadler-Smith, 2015).

The unconscious nature of the processes that result in creative solution is clear in the case of sudden insights. Reports of sudden insights are legion in literature. Poincaré (1914)

famously described how he got an important idea while he was just putting his foot on a bus though his prior conscious thoughts were entirely unrelated to it. It is well-known how August Kekulé stumbled upon the shape of benzene ring. After struggling with the issue for long, one day he dozed off before fire and saw an image of a snake biting its own tail. Irvine (2015), in his book *Aha! The Moment of Insight That Shape our World* (2015, originally published in 1997) describes some examples of this type of experience, calling them *Aha!* moment. Archimedes' *Eureka!* moment is a well-known case. Such moments of insight exist in our everyday life too where we come to know something suddenly. It can be as routine and inconsequential as the place where I kept my key chain or which dress should be worn for attending a party. There is a moment at which we get the conviction that this is the case. There is no way we can guarantee that whatever transpired before that would result in such conviction. Though the word insight is hardly used to refer to such moments they share the characteristic of sudden appearance.

2.2. Rest and mind wandering

The above discussion implies that unconscious processes play a key role in creative acts and the stage of incubation is primarily one where the unconscious is allowed to do its job. A study by Gilhooly et al. (2013) found that there are significant impacts of incubation on the overall creative process, and there is a sort of unconscious workforce during the incubation periods. Further, the role that rest or leisure played in the creative lives of many individuals makes it clear that creativity is not simply a matter of making more and more effort. What this indicates is that passivity appears to play a key role in creative endeavors.

Passivity needs to be understood as an aspect of agency. As Dewey (1917, p. 11) puts it "Undergoing, however, is never mere passivity <...> even if we shut ourselves up in the most clam-like fashion, we are doing something; our passivity is an active attitude, not an extinction of response". As de Haan and de Bruin (2010) argue it is inappropriate to cut a slice of experience into pure passive undergoing. That means, normal experience is a mixture of active and passive elements. That means, being ready to receive whatever comes to us is as much part of our interaction with the environment as acting on the environment. What this suggests is that passivity is not to be understood in a negative sense but as an equally important aspect of human life and agency. It can even be said that acting and receiving are two aspects of agency. If one aspect is underemphasized it can result in a distorted sense of agency.

Though in our times, being busy is equated with being important this was not always the case. The ancient Greek and Roman society identified the balance between work and rest as an important ingredient for good life and wisdom. Knowledge was considered to the result of *ratio* (reason) and *intellectus* (non-activity) (Soojung-Kim Pang, 2016). But in our times, especially since European Age of Enlightenment, more importance was given to notions like freedom and reason and, as a result, the role of unconscious factors in creativity or knowledge formation was neglected (Pieper, 1998). Whatever we receive does not appear to be a matter of freedom and, therefore, is seen as not earned by us. The importance given to human agency as an active process in our times can be understood in this context.

Even if rest or leisure is not respected in our times as an essential element of a creative life, this does not change the way creative processes occur. Just as incubation is essential in major acts of creativity, leisure or rest is undeniably of central importance in sustaining a creative life. To create is to give rise to something new even if what is new may not be novel for the society. A creative process, by its nature, is not a voluntary act. As far as ordinary creativity such as linguistic production is concerned, there is some form of control in the sense we can choose not to speak or write but this does not mean that the relevant cognitive processes do not take place unconsciously. When it comes to not-so-common creative acts there is hardly anything that is in control. For example, an idea may strike us at any time.

From the discussion so far, two important points emerge. One is that rest forms a significant role in the lives of many creative individuals. In other words, they are not always on the move to create something, but they give sufficient time to settle things down. Even the term *deliberate rest* (Soojung-Kim Pang, 2016) is used to refer to the habit of creative individuals involving frequent and sufficient periods of rest in their daily lives. The other important point is that of aha moment. This refers to the sudden appearance of a thought in the stream of consciousness which, for the time being, solves a problem or answers a question.

If incubation forms an important aspect of creative activity, then it is reasonable to hold that rest helps in facilitating incubation which, in turn, gives rise to the aha moment. What this indicates is that leisure or rest is not a mindless state; it can actively contribute to creative processes. The resting brain operates on the default mode. This is not a case of brain going blank but one of going to its default state. Studies indicate that the default mode network of those who score high on creativity differ from the ones who are not so creative. Highly creative people continue to do their work unconsciously while going into the default mode. This is possible because their "resting-state functional connectivity" (Soojung-Kim Pang, 2016) is high. That means, if the brain is wired in such a way as to perform tasks in certain ways it will do these things on their own even without paying attention to it.

The default mode network is often correlated with mind wandering (Zhou & Lei, 2018). When we are not engaged in any task which requires focused attention such as reading or writing the mind goes to its default mode and this is normally in the form of thoughts that are unrelated to what goes on in the present moment. For example, when we take a stroll, our thoughts can wander from something that happened long back to an event that is likely to happen after some hours.

Some studies indicate that mind wandering facilitates creative acts. For instance, a study conducted by some psychologists shows that in an unusual uses task (where subjects have to list novel uses of an ordinary item such as spoon) subjects who were allowed to let their mind wander performed much better (Baird et al., 2012). Michael Corballis even stated that "mind wandering is the secret of creativity" (Soojung-Kim Pang, 2016, p. 40).

2.3. Contemplative practices and creativity

The above discussion points out that rest or leisure is important for creative pursuit because it permits the mind to do its job. Normally during rest, the mind wanders and spontaneous thought flourishes. But meditation is well known as an attempt to control mind wandering

and this can give rise to the claims that meditative practices, in general, are not well suited for creativity. Eifring (2018) points out that the attitude of contemplative tradition to spontaneous thought is ambivalent because they want to achieve a mind without thought, and therefore it is often maintained that creativity and contemplative practices are not concordant.

This is evident in the approach of some spiritual traditions to the wandering nature of mind. In a study of Christian monasticism Graiver (2016) points out that, for the monastics, God is seen as the only worthy object of attention and mind wandering is treated to be morally suspect. Control of thought was seen as prior to other forms of self-control. Similarly, the ancient Indian practice of yoga is well known for its attempts to control the fluctuations of mind.

If mind wandering is important for creativity, then it implies that contemplative practices such as meditation which aim at controlling the wandering nature of mind would not be conducive for creativity. Though there is indeed a wider variety of contemplative practices across traditions most of them in one way or the other aim at reducing the fluctuations of the mind. In the words of Eifring (2018, p. 531) they display “<...> a skeptical attitude towards spontaneous thought”. This is not surprising given the fact that spontaneous activity of thinking runs counter to the attempts such as focusing on one object, central to some contemplative practices.

Even among contemporary scientific studies on mind, there are claims to the effect that mindfulness meditation may not be conducive for creativity. Some authors (Schooler et al., 2014) argue that we need a balance between mindfulness and mind wandering. Their main claim is that mindfulness may not be conducive for creativity. They cite some studies to argue that individuals with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder tend to score high on laboratory studies of creativity. Similarly, incubation works better when individuals are put at an undemanding task. That means, when their mind can simply wander, incubation is fostered and helps in creativity. As a result, they argue that mindfulness may not be compatible with creativity because creativity requires incubation, which is facilitated by mind wandering. Further practices such as mindfulness may help more in controlled analytical thinking, but creativity is not normally dependent on such thinking. Of course, a typical remote association test can be solved by consciously thinking about it and finding associations and, for this, mindfulness would not be detrimental. But most creative activities are not like that.

At the same time, many studies point at enhancement in creativity, as a result of mindfulness practice. The well-known psychologist Langer (2016) argues that mindful learning is the key to foster many positive traits including creativity. This happens because mindlessness results in rigidity and narrowness which, in turn, stifles creativity. She even says “Creativity and mindfulness are natural partners” (Langer, 2006, p. 19). According to her, creative engagement in whatever we do is a natural response, but this way of acting is not facilitated in the culture of our times in which whatever we do is subject to evaluation and judgment. In such a culture it is difficult to pay full attention to whatever we do because of the underlying requirement to ensure that our work is evaluated positively. It is important to note that in Langer’s understanding mindfulness is a matter of drawing novel distinctions or noticing new things. That is to say, even things that are normally dismissed as familiar can be looked at as if it were a new thing. This brings about an attitude of curiosity towards each moment and can foster creativity.

Many studies indicate that the actual practice of mindfulness helps in certain creative tasks. Some studies by Langer and her colleagues indicated that participants could be made to become more creative when words such as *may be* are replaced by the word *is*. When a particular instrument was presented with the statement *this is for a particular purpose*, the participants found it difficult to imagine that it could be used for something else. Another set of participants were told that "This may be for a particular purpose" and they were able to imagine its alternative uses (Langer, 2006). This shows that conditional language, in contrast with absolute language, makes people more open. If this shows the impact of language then any attempt to make a person more open-minded could have similar positive effects. Similarly, enhancing positive mental states were found to influence flexible and creative thinking (Isen, 2001). When participants were made to feel positive emotions, they were found to be better at various tasks such as finding out associations for words and ingenious problem solving.

Some studies directly engaged with school children to know the impact of mindfulness in creative tasks. A group of Latin American teenagers were able to have their graphic creativity enhanced with the help of mindfulness training (Justo et al., 2014). This effect was noticed with regard to multiple aspects of creativity such as fluency and originality. This can be interpreted in terms of enhancement of cognitive flexibility by checking habitual ways of reactions and this, in turn, is a significant factor in creative pursuits.

Another study demonstrates the positive impact of mindfulness in problem solving through insights (Ostafin & Kassman, 2012). These are cases of problem solving which happen through insight or Aha moments without following any step-by-step procedure. Consider the famous surgeon problem. A man and his son met with an accident. The man died on the spot. When the son was taken to a hospital for surgery, the surgeon exclaimed, "It is my son". The difficulty in solving this problem lies in the strong association between the concepts of surgeon and male. No amount of analytical problem solving may help in solving this because what is required is overcoming habitual automatic thinking.

The above discussion clearly suggests that certain aspects of mindfulness can immensely help in creative pursuits. This appears paradoxical. On the one hand mind wandering is expected to facilitate incubation and therefore meditation practices do not look conducive for creativity. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that certain qualities nurtured during mindfulness meditation are found to be positively correlated with creative problem solving. In the next section we suggest that this paradox can be resolved when mindfulness is understood in terms of open attention which, in turn, can enhance the beneficial aspects of mind wandering.

3. Open attention and creativity

Attention can be broadly divided into two: narrow and open. The former involves narrowly focusing on a particular thing in order to make use of it. It is focused on one thing and remains oblivious to whatever happens outside of it. The latter kind of attention is broad and open to whatever is there. It is not committed to any particular thing and can appreciate the whole without focusing on any particular part. Both kinds of attention, as McGilChrist

(2019) argues, is essential for survival. If narrow attention is essential to hold, say, your food item intact and have it, open attention is required to ensure that you remain safe from any approaching danger. Both these kinds of attention exist throughout animal kingdom. Neuroscientific studies shows that narrow attention is mediated by the left hemisphere and the broad one is by the right hemisphere (van Zomeren & Brouwer, 1994). Given its exclusive focus, narrow attention, characteristic of left hemisphere, is certain in its outlook whereas broad attention of right hemisphere is tentative and uncertain.

Since flexibility is a key feature of creativity one cannot but notice a clear connection between broad open attention and creativity. When attention is narrow there is rigidity and certainty, and things cannot move from the known field. It is clear that the possibility of insight is very less when narrow attention is employed. Open attention on the other hand is flexible and not fixated on anything. It does not look at a particular thing with a definite purpose. On the other hand, it is receptive to whatever comes and open to the unknown whereas narrow attention is confined to the known. It may be recalled that passivity, an essential factor in creativity, involves being receptive from all dimensions and open attention clearly facilitates it.

Right hemisphere is much more into dealing with novel stimuli and when they become familiar left hemisphere processes them (Goldberg & Costa, 1981). During perception it has been found that right hemisphere handles information from the periphery or background whereas left hemisphere is into information from foreground (Ellis et al., 2006; Schutz, 2005). These characteristics imply another major difference between these two ways of paying attention. The left hemisphere or the narrow way can function in the realm of certainty. Whatever it deals with needs to be made certain or unambiguous. Its motto is what Kahneman (2024) called, *what you see is all there is*. The right hemisphere or the broad way is comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. Since it is not focused narrowly it can accommodate much more things and remain open to unexpected and new things.

Thus it is evident that there is a clear link between open, broad attention and creativity. The features of the right hemispheric way of attention clearly support what John Keats famously called negative capability which, in his words, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason (Scott, 2002). This capacity amounts to being open or passive and ready to accept whatever comes. This clearly involves the predominant use of the right hemispheric way of attention.

Of course, it is well known that both hemispheres are involved in almost everything we do and creative acts are no exception. As Hoppe and Kyle (1990) state, active engagement of both the hemispheres is crucial in creative thinking. They note that surgical disconnection of the two hemispheres resulted in a lack of creativity (Hoppe & Kyle, 1990, p. 152). Such patients have a less sentential score and are unable to fantasize, imagine, or interpret; they present the event as it is without feeling. Such a situation creates hindrances in creative thinking. At the same time, it is clear that right hemisphere plays a key role when it comes to creative acts.

Understanding the world with the right hemisphere is unique because of its ability to interpret real-time events and objects using metaphors, context analysis, and narrative. That means, the right hemisphere has hermeneutical abilities that present the world as unique and new in each situation. Any damage in the right hemisphere affects our sense of uniqueness

(Cutting, 1997). Further, as far as ontogenetic development is concerned, it is the right hemisphere that develops first, and it can even be said to be nurturing the left (McGilchrist, 2021a, 2021b).

3.1. Choiceless awareness and passivity

Thus, there are reasons why certain types of contemplative practices may inhibit creativity whereas some others facilitate it. There is a huge difference between focused attention on some object to achieve, say, salvation and choiceless awareness of whatever enters the field of awareness without making any instantaneous judgment. The former may involve suppression and expectation, features that are not conducive for rest and consequent creativity. That means, if rest plays a key role in facilitating creative processes, then certain contemplative practices may not be conducive for creativity. But choiceless awareness does not involve any such suppression. On the other hand, it accepts whatever comes up each moment as it is. This amounts to being aware of all sensations, thoughts or feelings without getting identified with them. That means, certain features of mind wandering are preserved in choiceless awareness because there is no attempt to control wandering and focus on anything. At the same there is less identification with contents thereby reducing negative reactions to changing contents.

What can happen in such cases is that the normal pattern of association is broken. This can be due to overcoming the habitual fight or flight approach. Passivity, as opposed to active agency, is where one is ready to receive anything and this amounts to suspending the habitual fight or flight approach. Thus, when is at rest or in a state of passivity there is potential for going beyond the normal pattern of association which, in turn, can be conducive for creativity. Studies indicate that creative achievement is often associated with diffuse attention (Carson et al., 2003; Rowe et al., 2007; Baas et al., 2014). That means, when individuals are broad and open in their attention, their creative ability too becomes enhanced. Since creative tasks often require remote associations that are not normally present, being open to all kind of stimuli can help in activating such a wide activation. Further it has been found that there are clear correlations between diffuse attention in perceptual domain with that of conceptual domain (Friedman & Förster, 2005). That means, when a person is in a state of open attention in the perceptual domain similar openness arises in conceptual domain too.

Convergent evidence is available for the connection between open attention and creativity in terms of hemispheric activation as well. Problem solving through insight requires special role of right hemisphere (Jung-Beeman et al., 2004). This is consistent with the observation that right hemisphere is responsible for open diffused attention.

Almost every action is navigated by the attention we put into it. And every action requires different amounts of attention and different types of attention which cause different results. The narrow focus is an active mode of doing something, while open, broad attention is a passive mode. The narrow attention is geared towards something and instrumental in its outlook. That means its attention is confined to a certain purpose at hand and this is predominantly the way of the left hemisphere. However, in the case of open attention, the right hemisphere is engaged, and it is a matter of being open and receptive to whatever comes. This kind of engagement with the world is direct and unmediated whereas that of the left hemisphere is mediated through language.

It is clear that our culture strongly prefers narrow-objective attention with fixed goals and objectives (Fehmi & Robbins, 2007). Just like the society that has got its fixed goals like progress or development, the individual too is caught in the goal of growth and achievement. All this is possible when narrow attention is dominant making our outlook constricted and truncated. When the world is looked at simply as a means for one's instrumental purpose there is hardly any scope for feeling oneself to be part of the whole.

The rigidity of narrow attention is certainly not conducive for most forms of creativity. In fact, rigidity and creativity are like oil and water – hard to go together. The sudden flash of light of creativity is not something that can be commanded at will but the person needs to be receptive whenever it strikes. Passivity is the essence of the mental state which can receive such insights and choiceless awareness is the key to such a state.

3.2. Towards creative living

So far, our discussion tried to show that open attention is intimately connected to creativity. When it comes to the balance between right and left hemispheres it is significant to note that direct connection with the world is through right hemisphere. But when overall control remains with the left hemisphere creativity becomes narrow. As McGilChrist (2019) convincingly argues, in our times the left hemispheric way of paying attention has become dominant with serious consequences. The overall rise in individualistic and instrumentalist outlook can be attributed to this. In the context of creativity too this has got an impact. In fact, the previous discussion on the culture of being busy is a matter of an instrumentalist approach to time. Passivity is not given its due and creativity itself is understood in a narrow sense. When education nurtures a fixed mind set there is hardly any scope for flourishing of creativity which, in its rich sense, requires accommodating uncertainty and failure (Henriksen et al., 2019). This is not conducive to generating what is called creative confidence.

Creativity is primarily a mode of life and not just a means to achieve something. It is a matter of being flexible, open and receptive to changes, however small they appear to be. It is even claimed that a creative mode of life is integral to being healthy (Goff & Torrance, 1991). This amounts to making certain essential aspects of creativity as part of everyday life. This involves not restricting life to a series of achievements or not considering the present moment as a means to achieve something in future. As Jaspers (1995) points out, though the present moment is the only reality, it is often treated as a tool for some future ends (Wittmann, 2018, p. 41). Such an approach to life is constitutive of the industrialized human where clock-watching appointments become the primary way of “spending” waking time. In fact, even the metaphor of spending time presupposes looking at time as a resource. As Weber (1950) famously argued, looking at waste of time as a deadly sin has played a key role in the capitalist formation of society with its basis in maximum production and consumption.

A culture where time is treated as a resource not to be wasted cannot help looking at the present as a means for something in future. It is evident that such a way of life is hardly conducive for the right hemispheric way of open, broad attention which is ready to receive whatever comes. Attention becomes a narrow enterprise geared to a target. Creativity too becomes a means to an end. Further, it can recognize only creativity pursued deliberately.

Purely receptive looking or passivity is not treated as valuable. This was clearly articulated by Kant (2008) when he said that human knowing is exclusively discursive, meaning “not merely looking” (Pieper, 1998, p. 30). That means, knowledge is only the result of activity imbued with a sense of effort. This overlooks the role that receptivity plays in knowledge formation or creative pursuits in general.

When open, receptive attention is given its due then there is indeed a change in perspective towards life where the present is not treated solely in terms of its utility. That is certainly conducive for creative confidence because creativity is closely associated with less rigidity, more openness and the readiness to embrace uncertainty.

Thus, creative living involves maintaining a balance between narrow and broad attention or between left hemispheric and right hemispheric way of looking at things. It involves restoring the role of passivity and acceptance in daily life and amounts to a revision in the conception of agent as an active entity mostly trying to manipulate whatever it encounters. It recognizes the value of non-doing, tentativeness, and the ultimate fact that we do not know fundamentally all that goes around. It is certainly a cultural change – perhaps a dire need of our times when humans have to find ways to heal the planet from anthropogenic destruction.

4. Conclusions

Mind wandering is long associated with incubation and thereby seen as conducive for creativity. This often resulted in treating contemplative practices as antithetical to creativity because contemplative practices normally aim at controlling the wandering nature of mind. Our discussion demonstrates that open attention or choiceless awareness, integral to certain meditative practices, facilitates the positive aspects of mind wandering by reducing identification with thoughts and letting the wandering happen smoothly. This, in turn, can help in reducing the normal pattern of association and giving rise to novel ways of looking at things.

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