

## Book Review

### **From Mindfulness to Heartfulness: Transforming Self and Society with Compassion**

By Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu

Berett-Koeler (2018) xiii + 140 pages

Like many other books written by Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu (hereafter, M-S), this newest title is partially told through stories of the author's life, making it like a tribute to his own heritage of being dual Japanese and Irish-American of the first post-war generation, when such hybrid children were as yet quite rare in Japan. M-S has lived in both cultures, nurturing a deep understanding of both worlds, while receiving a privileged education in both. I find this book interesting to read, not only because of the deep new message it reveals, but I have also found the author and his life to be very interesting. He gives a narration of his life alongside his message of mindfulness and compassionate heartfulness.

I get the sense that the author is very intelligent and has led a privileged life in many ways. After an elite education at two top universities, Harvard University and Tokyo University, where he was also employed for a while, he took up his professional life in another prestigious institute, Stanford.

His message throughout the book is simple and is essentially this: Being able to reach a personal state of mindful equanimity and attain one's own personal happiness is not enough; we need to give back to society by being "heartful" and compassionate to others. The way to do this is by understanding and practicing the following attributes: vulnerability, authenticity, connectedness, listening, acceptance, gratitude and service. These major themes are the main chapter titles in his book.

The author, as a pioneer (or as a *sempai*, one who went before us) as *haafu* (= a person of Japanese and Caucasian mixed-ethnicity) among us and as a highly intelligent man, having been educated in some of the world's top universities and coached by top professors and a very "heartful" grandmother, has a lot to offer today's younger generation of mixed-ethnic individuals living in the two cultures in coming to understand their own identities better. M-S writes: "Heartfulness provides for our needs in finding identity, meaning and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values" (p. 19).

Throughout the book, M-S also presents many examples which compare differences between the two cultures; he particularly introduces words, concepts and cultural practices of Japan to his mostly Western readers. It seems that the author's bias is towards the Eastern view as being the preferred way of explaining the world, rather than

constructing a more balanced worldview by revealing the good and bad of both cultures by both critiquing and praising both cultures for their different contributions. But M-S's argument is persuasive and I often found myself nodding in agreement with his observations and his explanations of various *kanji* characters for words and concepts that are, for the most part, absent in Western cultures.

This book is arranged so that it can be used as a text in mindfulness seminars or classrooms. After each chapter, a few pages of exercises follow, making it look like a textbook.

The Preface begins with the scene of the author's 111 year-old dying grandmother, Mitsu, and the priest's words, "She waited for you." M-S's Japanese *obaasan* (= grandmother) waited for him for their parting greetings, before she died shortly after M-S's arrival back in Japan from the U.S. M-S's relationship with his Japanese grandmother and her lesson to him as a young boy of compassion from the viewpoint of the Japanese samurai spirit, her family being of samurai descent, and of Buddhism is one of the major themes in M-S's writings, and is very prominent in this newest book also.

In the Introduction that follows, M-S tells of his experiences of being bullied and teased in America, where he was brought up, for being Japanese or Asian, and also sometimes being taken for Chinese.

The author begins Chapter 1 by explaining his concept of "Beginner's Mind." This is a mindfulness principle coming from Buddhism which basically states that in order to have your vessel filled, one needs to begin by *being empty*. Thus, the beginner must come into the classroom ready to learn, with an empty mind.

Chapter 2 looks at "Vulnerability," or humbleness, beginning with a quotation from Ieyasu Tokuawa: "Find fault with thyself rather than with others" (p. 47). In his writing, the author self-deprecates often, to show us his vulnerability and humble stance in his weaknesses, making us only imagine how that dual worldview and his vulnerable background could have contributed to his motivation to do so well in his life in education and in his work. He writes from the stance of his American residency: "While this vulnerability was painful to endure, it freed me from the desire for perfection, as I was obviously imperfect, as Japanese, mixed-blood, with a mother who was racially different and with an alcoholic, socially dysfunctional father. . ." (p. 49).

Next M-S introduces several Japanese words or concepts to illustrate how vulnerability appears in Japanese culture. It is as if he sees his own Japanese culture exotically and wants to introduce it to the Western world, teaching unfamiliar Japanese word-concepts: *wabi-sabi*, *mono-no-aware*, *sensei*, and so forth.

Next he includes a section on "vulnerability at Harvard." Even though the author had just spent several pages in self-deprecation, he now reminds us of his very

privileged, prestigious achievement in psychology and medical education at Harvard University. Another section follows about his faculty work at another prestigious university, Stanford.

Chapter 3 examines the concept of “Authenticity.” M-S begins with the identity question that we all face as we grow up: “Who are you?” He answers this within his own positioning as a mixed-ethnic “half”-Japanese boy growing up in the U.S., using the metaphor of a *journey* in coming to discover himself.

Chapter 4 looks at the concept of “Connectedness.” This refers to belonging and the need for being part of a group, a cultural-social consciousness and practice very prominent in Japanese culture. M-S states, “The growing science of empathy provides us with the evidence that we are wired for compassion, but nevertheless there remains something mysterious about our need for deep connectedness. . . The truth of oneness is an active power that breaks through the walls that separate us from our fellow women and men” (p. 113).

Chapter 5, “Listening,” begins with a quotation from the mindful monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1975): “The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence” (p. 115). For this chapter the author tells the story of when he was doing hospice volunteer work in Boston and was assigned to a person who was dying. Again M-S credits his mentor from Harvard University, Professor Kiyoo Morimoto, for teaching him the lessons he needed to understand “the power of listening (with the heart).” The author states that it was enough just to convey to those dying people in need the messages, “I know what you are feeling” and “I am here for you.”

Again M-S presents the Japanese word/concept of “listening,” including an analysis of the Chinese kanji character for listening (聽), pronounced *kiku* in Japanese. He points out that this kanji character does not contain the symbol for *mouth* 「口」, since we do not need to speak while listening, but instead includes *heart* 「心」. M-S later teaches us the character 「間」 (*ma*) which can mean the empty space in-between or the light of day (*hi*) 「日」 between the gate (*mon*) 「門」.

In Chapter 6, “Acceptance,” M-S states, “We constantly struggle with wanting life to be a certain way rather than dealing with the way it really is. . . . Heartfulness involves balancing this tension between accepting things as they are and working to make them better. . . Acceptance moves us to be kind to ourselves and others through responsible action” (p. 14).

Chapter 7 examines “Gratitude” from a heartfulness viewpoint. Again, M-S begins by examining the Japanese word for gratefulness, 「感謝」 (*kansha*), analyzing the kanji character for it, which M-S explains contains heart 「心」 as well as the character for apology 「謝」.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, on “Service” begins with a quotation from the Dalai Lama: “As a human being, I acknowledge that my well-being depends on others and caring for others’ well-being is a moral responsibility. . . what we need is to take action. Therefore, my first commitment is to contribute to human happiness as best I can” (p. 187).

Having already mentioned earlier that his ancestors were samurai, again M-S reminds his readers of the Japanese contribution to mindfulness: “Samurai practiced mindfulness long before it was popularized in the West, and employed a style of communication that valued vulnerability, listening, acceptance and authenticity” (p. 191).

Near the end of the book, M-S re-states his own personal identity stance, which some of us might relate to personally: “Various circumstances in my life, including racial trauma, have given me a sense of difference, isolation, even alienation that I have battled. I have always had a sense of marginality, a feeling of being an outsider, a stranger” (p. 195).

When M-S writes of his alienation for being different, sometimes I feel like responding, “Hey, welcome to the club. I have lived for the better part of my life as a *gaijin* (= foreigner, outsider) in Japan, but so also have my son and many other mixed-ethnic “halves” in Japan (see Kamada, 2010) who might feel similar alienation, even more so as they have not themselves made the choice to be here. It is interesting to examine this exclusionism from the other point of view, that of a *haafu* child of our own generation growing up in the U.S., as did the author.

I highly recommend this book to others who are growing up alienated as mixed-ethnic individuals, whether they live in Japan or overseas. I also recommend it to their families and others who want to know more about such people. Furthermore, I highly recommend this book for its important new message of heartfulness within the concept of mindfulness.

I often personally felt the truth in many of the lessons shared in this book when I recall my own year spent in hospitals after having survived a massive hemorrhagic stroke a few years ago. In particular, the concepts brought up in Chapter 5 on “Listening” resonated with me. When I was hospitalized for so long and feeling very alienated, bored and lonely in hospitals and nursing homes, I just wanted my family to be there for me and to have someone to sit beside me and to listen to me heartfully. When my sister, my mother, my brother, and his wife took on that role, it was extremely comforting to me. I looked forward so much to their daily visits and just wanted them to stay near me. I also perceived the power of listening when I came across other stroke survivors who had had strokes which affected their ability to speak well. It took them a long time to get their words out and I felt they just wanted a patient listener to be near them to allow them to

speak at their own pace.

I felt that the examples that the author gives of his own dual upbringing and his personal identity struggles and how he was able to deal with them might be something that other newer generations of *haafu* children born and raised in Japan might also experience and might find helpful to read about. I would like for my own mixed-ethnic (*haafu*) son, who also has expressed an interest in psychology, to read this book. I think that the level of English might be within his range, as he is an adult now.

This is a book on a complex topic that is nevertheless easy to read and understand, even for people, like me, who know very little about *mindfulness*. I feel that it is especially easy to grasp for those of us who have lived in both cultures for some time, as most multilingual and multicultural children and their families have. So, for this reason I highly recommend this book to readers of *JJMM*, as well as for its important mindful mission of making the world a better place for all.

The book is a good lesson in how to be not only mindful, but also how to be heartfelt and compassionate, by doing such things as keeping a pure, empty beginner's mind, allowing oneself to be vulnerable, remaining authentic, staying connected with others, listening to others around oneself, being accepting of others and other ideas, maintaining a sense of gratitude by expressing it freely, and providing service to others whenever needed.

At some point, I got the feeling that for the author's next book, he might do well writing a book about the relationship of mindfulness and heartfulness to the various words/concepts in Japanese and the kanji characters used to write them, as he has already laid the groundwork for such a book by introducing many such characters and word/concepts of Japanese in this work as well as in some of his other writings. It must be remembered that it was mainly Buddhist scholars who originally devised the extremely high technology of written language in Japan, based on their study of Chinese texts. Some of the first writers and readers of the Japanese language when it was being constructed from Chinese writing were Buddhist scholars studying Chinese texts, known as *kanbun*. "The ascendancy of the written word itself was regarded as an extremely high foreign technology at this time" (Kamada, 1990, p. 149).

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