

STORIES FROM PRACTICE

CREATED BY PARTNERSHIP BROKERS. PRESENTED BY PBA.



The Meditative Art of Partnership Brokering

This paper explores the need for and value of meditative steps in reflective practice. It shows how a structured tool, such as Zentangles, can even focus on frameworks used in partnership brokering. One of the paper's central themes is *"learning is ever-evolving."* The author reflects on and re-engineers his problem-solving skills as Partnership Broker by using meditative art. For him it was an indispensable practice during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, where many had to learn how to do business differently. This journey has inspired him to deconstruct the partnership brokering framework using meditative art, to expand his understanding of it and to apply it creatively in a partnering context.

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BASED IN: Kathmandu, Nepal

ACCREDITED: 2020

PAPER EDITION: 25

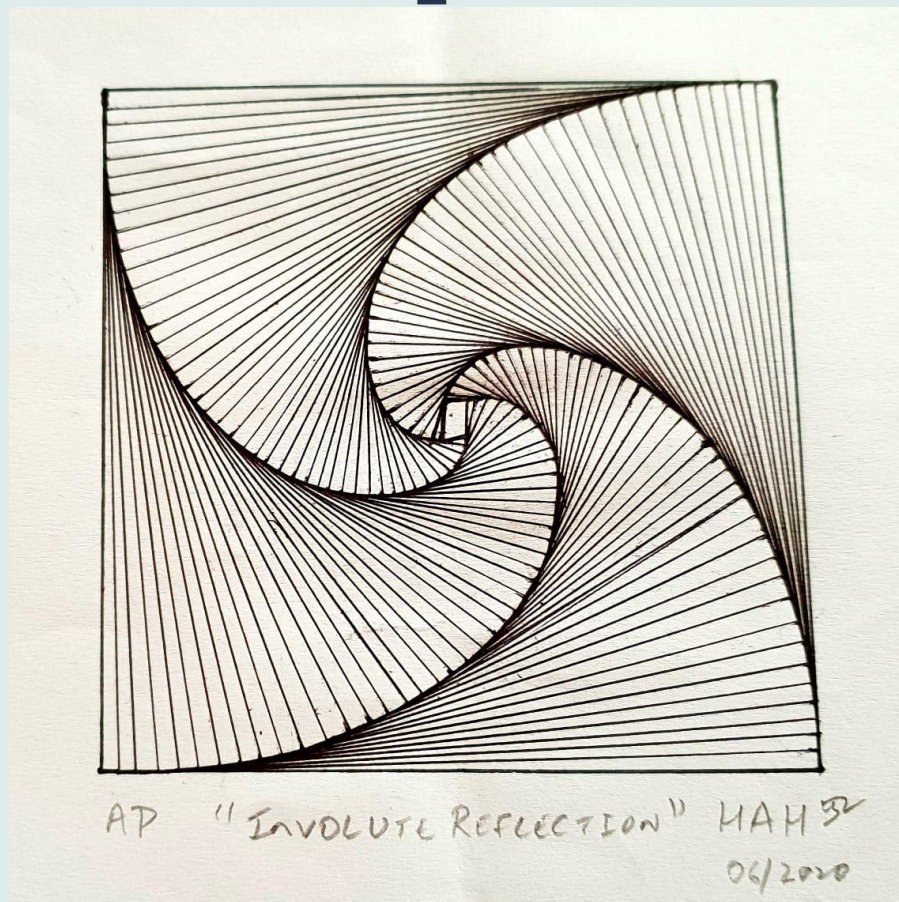
THEMES: Mindfulness, Partnership Brokering Tools, Cross-Cultural Contexts, Navigating the Groan Zone, Brokering Remotely

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03-October-2020
PBA Accreditation
Programme

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(3571 words)

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The Meditative Art of Partnership Brokering

I am a development practitioner by profession and am currently working on an agriculture development program based in Indonesia. The program uses a market systems development (MSD) approach, which aims to increase smallholder farmers' income by working through innovative business plans with private and public agribusiness companies. When I started this Partnership Brokering Accreditation (PBA) course, I was trying to understand the meaning of "reflective practice" and how this could be applied more effectively in my work. After reading two articles shared by my PBA mentor, Victoria Thom, on reflective practice: "The Imagined Conversation" by Ros Tennyson; and "The Value of Reflective Practice for Partnership Brokers" by Surinder Hundal, I was inspired to embark on a journey to unlock my potential as a partnership broker using meditative art.

By using meditative art, I reflected and re-engineered my problem-solving skills as a Partnership Broker. It has been particularly necessary during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, where we have all had to learn how to do business differently. This journey has inspired me to deconstruct the partnership Brokering framework using meditative art, understand it better, and apply it to a scenario where I would use meditative art tools to reflect on my partnering experiences with the end aim of being a better partnership broker.

There are many forms of meditative art, but I use the tool known as Zentangle diagrams. This paper explores the need for meditative steps in reflective exercises. It shows how a structured tool, such as Zentangles, can be used to focus reflection in the partnership Brokering framework. One of the paper's main themes is – "learning is ever-evolving." My next steps will be to apply the framework daily to my work and refine it with more learning.

The Importance of Reflection in Partnership Brokering

When my team brokers an external deal between an agriculture input company and their project, many variables may influence the deal. The average age may be much older or younger than you; ethnicity and culture or office culture may differ significantly. In terms of words used to communicate business negotiation ideas, mainly when the language is not the same, it may vary significantly. For example, a reference to work practice, even expectations for the bottom-line or profit, and their business model or strategy may be quite different from your own when working in a cross-cultural environment. Even though, in my case, the focus might be on increasing the income of the poor by getting services that improve their yield, preconceived ideas about both will need to be addressed before a successful partnership can be brokered. This requires reflection.

One of my learnings through this journey has been that – "one needs to get lost before they are found." As in PBA theory, the 'Groan Zone' opens up as one diverges while collecting different ideas and insights to a point where it can get quite overwhelming. When one starts sifting through those ideas, they start looking for patterns, layers, details, and recognising and being aware of the factors pushing or pulling the negotiation process, such as tensions or synergies, that help us as brokers make sense of it. And as we come down from the other side, everything starts to converge, and as we focus on the key factors that need to be addressed or taken forward in the partnering process.

My own recent experience navigating the Groan Zone happened midway through my PBA accreditation course. After an initial period of *divergent thinking* about my personal and professional skills, I was mostly asking questions that were only superficially going through the process and the cycle of partnership brokering. I realised I had to ask the hard and challenging questions to myself to get in-depth insight. I had to reach a point where I could unpack everything and lay it out on the table. Then I had to sort through it all and start to make sense of – What is essential? What to keep? How to organise it so I could find what was needed?

The best way I found to articulate and analyse these questions to see these patterns, layers, and details were through meditative art. Using this technique, I could increase my awareness about the factors pushing or pulling the brokering process, which helped me make sense of it. It helped me focus on the essentials and make decisions to move forward into convergent thinking.

I was able to converge my thinking through the meditative art tool of "Zentangle¹." This tool helped me reflect, focus, expand my imagination, trust my creativity, increase my awareness, and respond confidently to the unexpected details during interactions. In turn, it helped me make decisions that changed or challenged the course of the meetings. This paper will explore the advantages of using meditative art and how it can positively impact the brokering process, particularly during increased stress levels.

So, What is a Zentangle?

In my view, anyone can zentangle! It's much simpler than it looks, and the intricacy is an illusion. Zentangle is a form of meditative art with patterns, or 'tangles,' put together to form a Zen-tangle, as shown in figure 1 below. These patterns are drawn on small pieces of paper called "tiles." These are known as tiles because one can assemble them into mosaics. Zentangle art is non-representational and unplanned, so you focus on each stroke and not worry about the result. However, it is not doodling. Doodling is usually out of boredom and mindlessness. Zentangles focus on creating pattern designs and mindfulness (you are purposely drawing something) to think and focus on what is on your mind. It is very meditative because one is drawn naturally towards repetitive patterns. It helps one focus on understanding details, patterns, and thinking on multiple layers.

Meditative art stimulates a feeling of selflessness, timelessness, and effortlessness. Partnership brokering practice requires focus and balancing many variables to make it flow - nothing is constant. Thus, there will be many disruptions or disturbances along the way. The key to resolving these disruptions or upheavals is to keep on focusing and flowing – and this is where meditative art can help in the process.

When I started this PBA journey, I had a hard time focusing. While I knew the end goal, I did not always know the best way to get there. I have been practising partnership brokering and meditative art separately for a few years now. Only now do I see the benefit of combining both the practices for the art to complement the brokering. It happened when I remembered my conversation with a monk about mindfulness.

"There is geometry in the humming of the strings; there is music in the spacing of the spheres"-Pythagoras

When I was a teenager, I had once gone to a Buddhist Vihara in Patan, Kathmandu, Nepal. While entering the Vihara, it felt like being transported to another realm of calmness and tranquillity. There I met a monk, and we had a conversation about meditation and how to practice mindfulness. He said to me that, "Meditation is not about the hours you make for mindfulness; it's a conscious pursuit you can practice anywhere, anytime and for any amount of time." He also added that meditation helps reduce stress, keep calm, and make people more attentive. It helps increase productivity and alleviate stress levels.

The monk told me that the Buddhist practitioners of meditation believe that people must have guidance while meditating when not done correctly, it can cause more harm than good. Thus, a teacher's presence is indispensable. Once someone has practised the basics of meditation with their mentor, they can practice it independently. But over time, as we are all going through changes, we must have someone to

¹ Meditative Drawing as an Intervention to Reduce Anxiety among Medical Students”

reflect on our experiences. Similarly, with PBA, my brokering mentor² helped me unlock my potential by guiding me in the right direction of what reflection is about and finding my style to achieve it.

I have combined my meditative art practice with my daily practice as a partnership broker to improve my mindfulness and be fully conscious when participating in my work. Through whatever method, practising meditation is not a one-time exercise; it is something one should practise every day; it is a path that keeps unfolding. Similarly, reflective learning as a partnership broker is not a one-time activity but also something that one needs to practice regularly.

"But I'll tell you what hermits realize. If you go off into a far, far forest and get very quiet, you'll come to understand that you're connected with everything." Alan Watts

A good partnership broker uses their senses, emotions, experiences, and intuition as tools for learning and knowing. The key is never to stop listening, observing, and reflecting on partnership brokering aspects. Every group with a common motive comes into play to achieve the goal in-line. Brokering's primary principle is to be goal-oriented and focused on activities that lead to completing the plan or task. Any brokering activity's goal is to inch closer to a win-win outcome. It's about navigating through complexity, anxiety, pushing boundaries, and exploring different alternatives to reach this win-win solution.

The reflections that come through meditative art have helped me explore ideas, complex relations, opportunities, and new approaches to reviewing ongoing or new partnerships. In those conversations, I have been able to focus on opportunities for learning by asking questions like "Why"; "What"; "What if x happened"; "What makes sense"; "What approach fits"; and "What can I learn from it?". It is demonstrated through a case study below, where I effectively used meditative art practice to reflect and, in turn, apply the principles of good partnership brokering practice.

Background of the Partnership

One of the agricultural sectors I work in is the pig livestock sector. One of the significant risks to the sector is African Swine Flu (ASF). In early 2020, in one of the provinces we were implementing a project in, my team and I met with the provincial Governor's Executive Advisor. The meeting's objective was to highlight the ASF outbreak scenario and lobby for partnering with the local government's livestock department to respond to this issue. On the first day of our meeting, halfway through it, after understanding the current ASF outbreak situation and the impact on the sector, he stopped the meeting and took us to meet and present our business plan to the Governor. The current Governor is very keen and proactive to develop the province. When we mentioned an agreement with the pig sector's provincial livestock department, he told us that he wanted the agreement to be direct with his office and not just for the Pig sector but as an umbrella partnership in various agricultural sectors.

To reach a joint agreement, we had to get approval for the arrangement from the donor. We had many rounds of feedback with the latter about the contract's structure and theme. There were competing needs between what the Governor wanted and what the donor wanted. The donor's main concern was the legal risks of a partnership with a local-level government when the donor's head contract was with the National Government. The Governor's main concern was the timeliness of the contract going ahead. After many rounds of meetings and discussions, we settled on a partnership format. It was only after using the meditative art tool; I was then able to understand the issue and provide a solution to move forward. The agreement's final preferred template was a yearly work plan. The work plan would be followed by detailed terms and conditions about the partnerships and its activities.

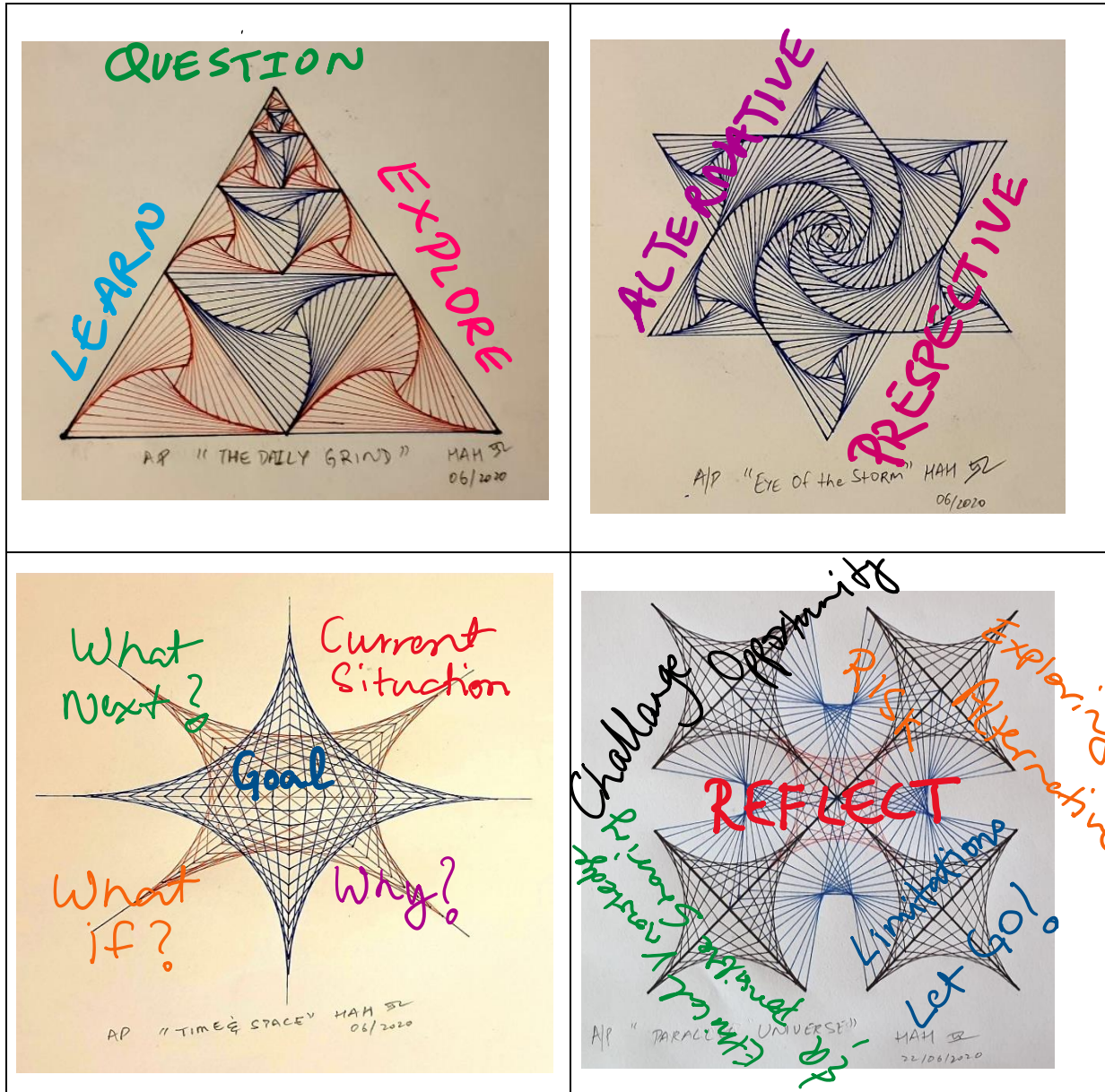
² Victoria Thom

The Meditative Art of Reflection:

My Reflection by meditative art in this situation led me to sketch the figures below. These sketches helped me structure the ongoing discussions within sound brokering practice principles. I was able to ask questions in every area to understand and drive the process forward. *(Please refer to Annex 2 for step by step guide on "How to make Zentagles and Reflect?")*

Gazing into the central swirl of these patterns allows you to go inward and access alternative perspectives. It helps you reflect on multiple layers of behaviours, patterns, habits, and reactions. The grip of external influences dissolves, and the perspectives emerge. This allows you to repattern your thinking and enables you to see and provide alternative actions to the given agenda.

Figure 1 Perspectives



A formal agreement posed a high risk to the donor, which, in hindsight, none of us had anticipated. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the donor cautious about unforeseen risks, but they could not articulate this well. What was needed was an alternative to a formal agreement, which was also not required by

Indonesian law, and was counter to our agreement with the National Government. An exercise using the framework helped me concentrate and focus on the real but unspoken issues.

As I did my artwork, I started by asking: What is their incentive for the partnership? Why do they need us? After reflecting, the answer to this I found is that after sharing information and knowledge about the current and possible future scenarios about the ASF outbreak in the pig sector, the provincial government understood the gravity of the situation as potentially 1.2 million pig farming households could lose their income source. At that moment, the ASF outbreak had already killed approximately 4,000 pigs affecting 1,143 farming households. We had analysed the situation and had created a road map for the government to respond to the problem. During my meeting with the Governor, I understood that he was pro-development. After understanding the impact of our work from the previous five years, he wanted to strengthen further the partnership that would support his vision of development in the province. While we had the Governor's buy-in, we had not anticipated the risk of a formal agreement and the threat of this for the donor. So, I asked questions such as what do I want from the negotiation, or what are the challenges and risks? How can we collaborate with the province but in a way that does not impact the donor's relationship with the National Government?

To explore the possible answers to these questions, I started doing meditative art to focus and to understand, visualise, and analyse each layer of balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, rhythm, and unity during the virtual discussions (which were voice calls rather than video due to connectivity issues). As with my drawing, the layers of the debate seemed to be moving. The issues were not focused but by using the drawing exercise, and I drove the meetings' focus towards the main incentive, plan, purpose, or point. By being more mindful, I was better able to pick up cues from the donor on the real issues. In my zentangle, I saw each individual independently (a single layer) and as a whole unit (multiple segments) and channelled positive energy towards the same plan or goal. In the end, we were able to come up with a win-win solution by using the Annual Work Plan idea.

Despite having already agreed on a contract with the provincial government, the challenge was to convey this message to the Governor's team that we had worked with to prepare the contract. Also, at the same time, we had to seize the opportunity of this partnership and save our earlier efforts to address ASF from being in vain. Understanding this limitation, we approached the Governor's office and opened up about the risks to this partnership due to the constraints posed by the formal contract. Because of the way we had approached the negotiations and the goodwill we had developed with the Governor's primary adviser; his office was very cooperative and flexible regarding the Partnership format.

Using the zentangle, I was able to analyse the challenges and risks to the partnership, explore alternatives approaches and find a constructive way of moving forward by letting go of the initial idea of a formal umbrella agreement for the partnership. The zentangle also helped me focus on my reasons and frustrations of holding on to the formal agreement.

I realised that partnering principles are being prepared to challenge all assumptions and risks at any stage of the partnering cycle in ways most likely to bring about constructive change. In this case, addressing the difficult and challenging questions and then realistically evaluating it was a vital lesson. Bringing everyone on the same page was a significant breakthrough, making real collaboration and partnership flourish. The meditative art helped me focus on partnering principles such as sharing knowledge generously, exploring alternative approaches, being open about risk and limitations, and being ethical and responsible.

“Stop leaving, and you will arrive. Stop searching, and you will see. Stop running away, and you will be found.” -Lao Tzu

I need sufficient self-knowledge to allow for the uncomfortable situation of not knowing to sink in. Actually, 'not knowing' is a precondition for a state of coming to know and continually being open to new possibilities. By openly integrating reflection in the learning process through meditative art, the learning has become more apparent, and I can better articulate it. I can contribute more actively to meaningful change in a complex context.

Being reflective is not something that always comes easily or naturally. People tend to avoid the more profound questions and steer away from the feeling of unease that is caused by friction, disruptions, or dissonance. Yet these tensions and (inner) conflicts create the kind of energy and questioning needed to learn.

In hindsight, one of the learnings from this journey has been that reflection is not just limited to talking or writing. It can also be visual or spatial. Meditative art has been a useful tool to give me the space to release unease and get better focus as a broker. For me, reflection is a valuable way of understanding and making sense of my feelings, observations, insights, lessons learned and finding a way forward. The meditative art method helped me be self-aware about various challenges, risks, assumptions, and perceptions. It helped me identify, learn, and develop the importance of framing a problem before trying to solve it, exploring the different alternatives, linking it with my past experiences and making sense of it with the theory of partnering principles. I learned that the process of reflection isn't a one-time thing but instead a repetitive cycle. Reflective practice means challenging your own beliefs and values to see the validity of that and be open to reflect and evaluate how accurate those beliefs are, and to change to improve one's own personal and professional development. It is learning through and from their own experience to gaining new insights into self and practice.

This journey has enabled me to reflect deep into my past experiences and choose the most relevant, highest value learning that I have had. So, in boarding school, I learned several things - how to be a good leader, negotiator, facilitator, conflict resolution for deescalating very conflicted and complex situations. All this had been engrained in me since my early days. In turn, this process has helped me mirror some of those learnings that I had packed away at the back of my mind and had forgotten.

I have been doing this subconsciously. This process of revisiting my past has forced me to reflect and take the learnings ahead, both personally and professionally. Taking those learnings and aggregating it has helped me build an archive of experiences. Those learnings vs. what I am very passionate about coincided during this journey. Then I realised my passion for art is that subconsciously, the education that I have had since childhood—boarding school to university and my professional working experience from Disney to development projects - has taught me patience.

I understood now that subconsciously this is how my mind works. When I look at a problem or a set of challenges, I apply this framework to resolve it. I know this framework works because I have tried and tested it throughout my life. There have been instances where I have taken something that was utterly broken, reverse engineered it, applied this framework, which is premised on my work and art practice, and thus, solved the problem and saved the partnership. Therefore, I know I have to work with this framework in my mind, which I can apply to build on partnerships. Partnership brokering is all about issue resolution at the end of the day. It's all about 'give and take' negotiations, understanding what the shared objectives are and where the gaps (challenges, conflict, or opportunities) are, and then filling those gaps.

In the current pandemic, the whole world has shifted to the virtual/ digital world of information and communication technology. There is a risk of becoming disconnected from people and the environment—the essence of finding meaning, wisdom, and learning. Thus, reflection is critical to understanding, no

matter what the context, since it allows the sharing of experiences and insights, and creates an opportunity to draw out the lessons for a more profound and embedded learning experience.

Finally, I feel an equilibrium point where art and science meet. This journey has helped me reach that place of focus to find my equilibrium. Thus, this is where art meets science as they coexist in harmony by combining the theories of partnership brokering practice and meditative art as a reflective practice.

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- <https://www.ccepp.ca>
- <https://www.ZentanglePatterns.com>

Annex 2: How to make Zentagles and Reflect?

Zentangles

Zentangles is the art of drawing designs using structured patterns. When one draws a Zentangle, they create a work of art and deliberately create a mood, focus, and state of mind. Concentrate on drawing small blocks of patterns at a time; going with the flow lets your mind get into a calming zen state. It allows one to follow through on impulsive thoughts, so their doodle won't be restricted by expectations, giving you an unexpected final design and a glimpse into your subconscious!

Following the series of steps focused on a set of patterns mentioned below will guide you (as a beginner) to get started. Once you get the hang of it and have a few basic Zentangles under your belt, let your mind wander and be as creative as possible! A pattern is created, and one's imagination will soar beyond bounds.

Try not to have a preconceived idea of what it should look like; let your imagination move your hand, settle into a meditative state of mind, and you'll be surprised with what you can do when you're not focusing on the big picture.

What You'll Need

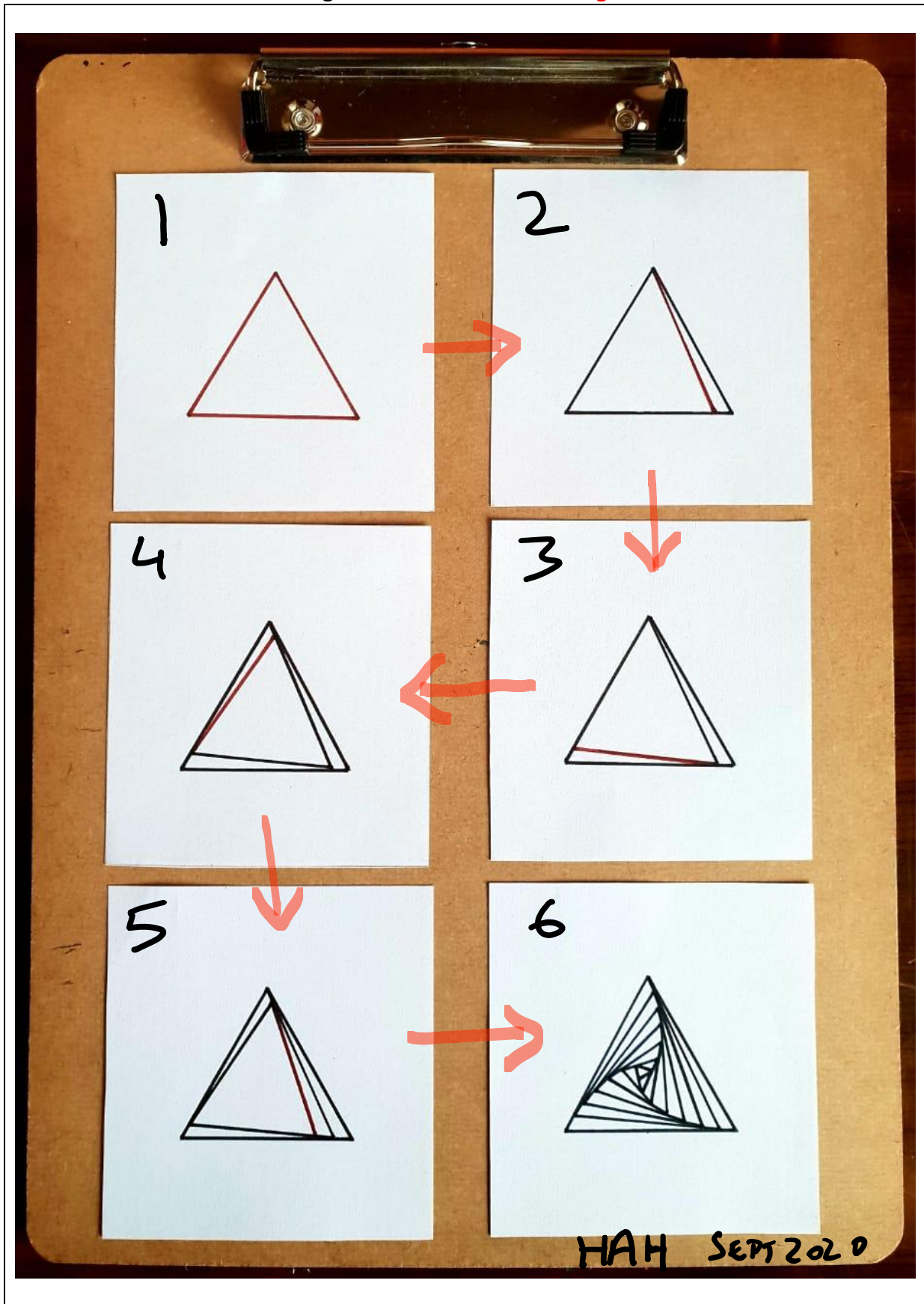
- Pencil or Felt/sketch tip pen (recommended Sakura Pigma Graphic 1)
- Paper (any size)
- A few basic patterns to reference (circle, square, triangle, or any platonic shapes) or any shape

How do you make Zentangles³? (as shown in the picture below)

- Using a pencil or pen, begin to outline the shape you want to Zentangle (circle, square, triangle, or any platonic forms).
- Next, divide your shape into several sections known as Strings. Strings are the lines that divide the figure into individual sections.
- Fill in each section with a pattern. Choose an area to start with and fill it with a repetitive pattern. Don't spend time planning a design; just draw.
- A Zentangle with every section filled. Repeat step three for each section. Change the patterns, or continue with it, get creative!
- Colour or shade if you choose. Add colour or shade the areas you'd like to define.

³ Instructions and tips on Zentangle is referenced from the website for the paper (www.ZentanglePatterns.com). I am an amateur zentangle artist, as my art is inspired by sacred geometry art.

Figure 2 How to Draw Zentangle



Some tips:

- Don't resort to an eraser. There are no mistakes in Zentangles. Your error might be the foundation for a new pattern that takes your art in an exciting new direction.
- Remember that with Zentangle art, you can't fail. There is no right and wrong because there is no pre-determined solution to what you're creating.
- Challenge yourself to get as intricate and detailed as possible, play with different pen thicknesses, shading styles, and colour combinations.
- There are no limits to your imagination!

The Art of Meditative Reflection:

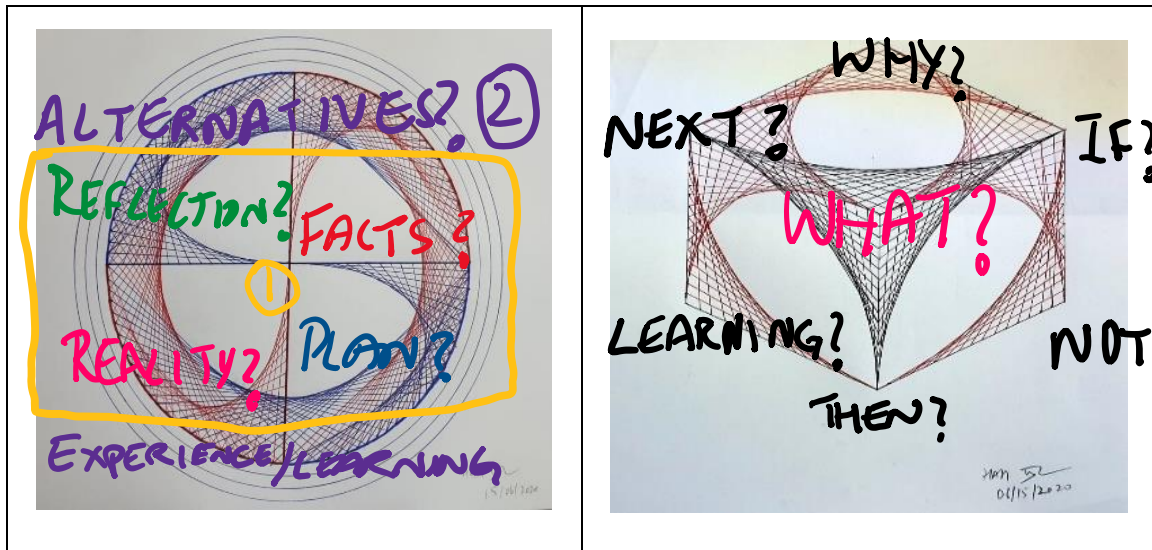
To me, reflective learning has been a sensemaking process. It has encouraged 'deeper learning' as it involves consciously thinking about and analysing experiences. It has enabled me to activate prior knowledge and construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct my knowledge. It has helped me step back from an event or experience to analyse it from different perspectives. In doing so, I have been able to relate it to my past experiences to draw out what it means. For me, it has been about taking time to think, feel, and digest. It has been a process about diagnosing lessons learned, conversing many possibilities, prioritising, and integrating the learning into a strategy for implementation to improve future partnerships.

Through reflection, the outcome of learning has become more evident, explicit, and meaningful. The core questions include: 'What have I heard, seen, and experienced in the learning process so far, what was most meaningful to me? How does it relate to my existing knowledge and experiences, and how can I apply it in my professional work context?'

How to Reflect?

1. Once you have completed your zentangle, you will feel calmer and are richly immersed in what you were doing. At that moment, one is focused and can observe the art. So, ask yourself the demanding and challenging questions about the partnership brokering experience you had earlier. Questions like: "Why"; "What"; "What if x happened,"; "What makes sense,"; "What approach fits,"; and "What can I learn from it." Those questions have led to a focus on learning opportunities, and the answers to these do give me better insights that I consider using in the next meeting.
2. Let your eyes move slowly across the surface of the artwork. Notice where your gaze naturally rests. Observe the colours, shapes, lines, textures, and forms.
3. Notice what arises as you observe. Be receptive to the thoughts, emotions, memories, and ideas that surface. Now imply each of them, in the context of partnership brokering good practice principles.
4. Write those partnership brokering principle ideas in response to the artwork. Write freely without inhibition!!! Give yourself time and permission to explore!
5. As with meditation, give yourself plenty of time to wrap up so that the experience can be integrated into your daily partnership brokering practice.

Figure 3 Alternative Realities⁴



Some Tips on reflection:

- These questions are more open-ended questions that can be specified and adjusted to fit the learning context. Things that are usually taken for granted are the ones I base my questions around. Taking time to think critically and making sense of that has helped me understand my experiences, information, and facts in an in-depth way by creating new ideas and insights.
- To me, reflective learning has been a sensemaking process. It has encouraged 'deeper learning' as it involves consciously thinking about and analysing experiences. It has enabled me to activate prior knowledge and construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct my knowledge. It has helped me step back from an event or experience to analyse it from different perspectives. In doing so, I have been able to relate it to my past experiences to draw out what it means. For me, it has been about taking time to think, feel, and digest. It has been a process about diagnosing lessons learned, conversing many possibilities, prioritising, and integrating the learning into a strategy for implementation to improve future partnerships.
- Examples of such questions that I ask myself during such sessions are: what is the real incentive for this partnership? Do they need this partnership? Why didn't they do it already? What is their primary agenda? Are we on the same page? What does our donor want/interest? Will it meet the donor and the partner's expectations?
- Reflective learning has helped me reach a solitude place to have imagined conversations with myself. The reflections have helped me explore ideas, complex relations, opportunities, and new approaches to reviewing ongoing or new partnerships.

⁴ Every individual is unique, but we tend to overlook that. These artworks allow you to visualise, explore and understand the uniqueness of each dimension or individual. This allows you to see and provide alternative actions to the given agenda.