

## **BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR THE PRACTICE OF MINDFUL INQUIRY**

*This requires the instructor to sharpen his/her ability to listen closely, allow space, refrain from the impulse to give advice, and instead, to inquire directly into the actuality of the participant's experience.*

*Jon Kabat-Zinn, Saki Santorelli 2005*

### **INTRODUCTION - Mindful Inquiry**

Mindful inquiry as it is practiced in mindfulness-based programs like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), relies on emphasizing learning through the experience of the present moment as it is revealed through the practice of mindfulness meditation. It is therefore essential for MBSR and MBCT teachers to have a personal practice. This is because the process of mindful inquiry requires an MBSR/MBCT teacher to reveal the spirit of mindfulness along with an ability to communicate an oral consistency of where that understanding rests.

What follows is a framework outlining a number of ways to recognize and build the skills of mindful inquiry. We will look at two main themes; an embodied mindful presence and the delivery of mindful inquiry. This provides a platform from which to discern important considerations in the development of competency skills.


A word of caution; no amount of reading about this subject is a substitute for experience gained through teaching the MBSR/MBCT programs. In addition, having a personal mindfulness meditation practice, attending professional trainings, and having supervision are important elements in building and sustaining skill and proficiency.

### **AN EMBODIED MINDFUL PRESENCE – Attitudinal Foundations, Awareness and Compassion**

An MBSR/MBCT teacher clearly demonstrates the embodiment of certain attitudinal foundations which have their roots in the practice of mindfulness. She is able to embody and express the essential nature of mindful awareness, one that promotes trust and confidence in the rationale for attending to each moment. She will be attending to and listening for those moments of insight, gently guiding and re-inforcing a participant(s) inner wisdom born from this 'bare attention'. She will deeply understand that in mindfulness meditation practice we are learning how to 'sit' with ourselves and the ever-changing nature of sensations, not because we are trying to better ourselves, but because this is the kindest and most compassionate thing we can do for ourselves and for our engagement in life.

*Attitudinal Foundations* ~ a mindful presence embraces certain attitudinal characteristics of mindfulness practices (Kabat-Zinn, J. 1990, 2013), which are embodied in a teacher's presence. The mindfulness-based teacher emphasizes paying attention to experience as it is in the present

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and conveys a sense of meeting each of these moments with patience, trust, and ‘beginner’s mind’. She embodies further qualities of non-judging, acceptance, non-striving and letting go as attributes that support the development of mental and emotional resilience. In presenting these characteristics, a foundation for exploring experience with curiosity – illuminating an interest in the ‘how?’ and ‘what?’ of experience rather than the ‘why?’ is laid down. In this way, attention is drawn to investigating the present moment and not to the narrative of past experiences or predictions for the future.

**Patience** ~ most of us are used to moving fast: getting things accomplished quickly before we move onto the next thing to be done; checking things off on a list; juggling a number of projects at one time. The practice of mindfulness presents the wisdom of slowing down and that it takes patience to re-set the busyness of the mind and allow things to reveal themselves in their own time.

- **For the Teacher** this means embodying patience as an attitudinal quality of mind/heart which demonstrates and models to the group participants the understanding that it can take time to settle and learn about what it means to be with oneself and attend to what is arising.

**Trust** ~ the basic trust in one’s own intuition and authority. Turning towards one’s own sense of what is here.

- **For the Teacher** it means conveying a sense of confidence in the steadiness of questions that tune into each individual’s experience of the present moment, assigning the sense that they are the expert, and reinforcing an internal locus of wisdom.

**Beginner’s Mind** ~ you need only watch children at play to see the veracity of living inside each moment. With the practice of mindfulness, we can re-discover the delight that each moment is a fresh one and no matter how often the mind moves away from the original object of attention, it is possible to re-align one’s intention to be present.

- **For the Teacher** it is embodying a gentle presence that understands (from the experience of personal mindfulness practice), about the many modes of mind and behaviors that take us away from the present, and she articulates a caring attentive guidance on noticing those tendencies.

**Non-judging** ~ we judge everything! Who’s in or out; who’s winning or losing; what we like and don’t like; what we can do better than others; who is better than us; who is cleverer, better looking, has more money and on and on.

- ***For the Teacher*** the practice is embodying a friendly, inquisitiveness that encompasses a deep well of compassion because of the direct experience of having personally met the harshness of internally held negative attitudes and judgments.

**Acceptance** ~ when we stop our busyness, and get in touch with the contents of mind/heart we can stumble into aspects of ourselves that are difficult or unwanted. Befriending these places of feeling and thought, giving them as much space as they need allows them to be known just as they are. This acceptance is not passive but requires a compassionate courage to witness without changing what is arising.

- ***For the Teacher*** it is embodying a presence that models permission, kindness, spaciousness, gratitude and love while gently holding what the practice is pointing to, namely that there is no aspect of ourselves that is not worth loving and taking care of.

**Non-striving** ~ much of our lives are spent in doing. The idea of ‘being’ with an unfolding process with no preconceived agenda is liberating allowing us to drop into each moment for its own sake. When this happens, we wake up to the possibility of being present, resting in the genuine knowledge that this place of non-striving can gently soothe and make space for a tuning in and turning towards.

- ***For the Teacher*** it is modeling calmness, gentleness, and compassion. Resonating to the habitual urges to do; knowing them through one’s own encountering of them; working with the edges in our leading of inquiry when we think we need to fix or problem solve because we bump into suffering, our own and the suffering of the people we are guiding.

**Letting go** ~ perhaps the most difficult of all of the attitudinal foundations. We are inclined to hold onto things/people/events long after they have passed. We tend to grasp for what we want, want more of what we like and feel we need. Interestingly we have an equal propensity to hold onto negative situations. In our mindfulness practice we get to see how this tendency of the mind leads to increased suffering. By turning towards what is being held onto we can see clearly what little purpose it serves, and how much pain and suffering results from this grasping. By observing this many, many times with kindness and gentleness, we are eventually released from this conditioned habit simply by seeing and understanding the suffering that results.

- ***For the Teacher*** it means modeling gentle, kind acceptance of the often harsh and judgmental conditioned modes of mind. Embodying steadiness and patience through personal knowledge of the frequency and many ways the mind wanders into self-criticism, disparagement and intolerant modes of mind. Encouraging again and again a compassionate evenness in waking up to each moment as it arrives, so that we can develop a consciousness that allows us to release and soften over time, understanding how painful grasping and clinging can be. This is the process of liberation.

## **Embodied Mindful Presence - Awareness**

An MBSR/MBCT teacher will embody mindful **awareness**. Mindful awareness is not dependent on a specific pedagogy but on a teacher's personal relationship to, understanding and experience of mindfulness practices. This experiential learning is cultivated over time. Maintaining a mindfulness meditation practice develops confidence in the benefits of bare attention, (attending to each moment) and reinforces an active and gentle participant-observer state of mind. This in turn supports and strengthens insights gained from the establishment of such a presence and strengthens a mindful consciousness about the efficacy of such mind and mood states as kindness, equanimity, compassion and joy.

In addition, an MBSR/MBCT teacher who has experienced the movement of experience changing over time without trying to shape it in any way, can promote and cultivate a perceptual shift in relating to the conditioned responses to reactive modes of mind. This is particularly useful for developing a different relationship to negative thinking and low mood. It is this relational change to noticing the fluctuations of thinking and mood that eventually lessens cognitive and emotional reactivity. This in turn promotes different choices and behaviors that contributes to the reduction of suffering and enrichment of overall well-being.

An MBSR/MBCT teacher who has the direct experience of these moments, over and over again will remain firmly grounded in the landscape of mindfulness, understanding that as we practice we return to these places many times. There is no objective. Rather we wake up to the uniqueness of each moment and our relationship to it.

## **Embodied Mindful Presence – Compassion**

In teaching and practicing mindfulness one is sustaining and strengthening an innate capacity for compassion. This is offered for ourselves and towards others. Compassion grows through the experience of allowing and meeting what is difficult or even painful. It is also sustained in moments of joy, happiness, and contentment.

A mindfulness-based teacher demonstrates by her presence and through the inquiry dialogue process, the invitation and possibility of approaching anxiety, fear, sadness and anger rather than denying, avoiding, pushing away or struggling with these emotions. And that by turning towards this suffering it is possible to empathically attend to the experience and know there is nothing that needs fixing. Simply by being with, allowing for and tuning into the difficult a well of deep compassionate caring is revealed. This provides the template for understanding how we relate to the difficult/unwanted can be a choice. We appreciate that suffering is actually universal. In recognizing this we can also acknowledge the profound truth that we are all subject to birth, sickness, old age and death.

## **THE ARTICULATION OF MINDFULNESS ~ working with the Three Layers of Inquiry**

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One of the ways to understand the delivery of mindful inquiry is to view it as an approach that is organized around three concentric layers of questioning (Crane, R., 2009). These three layers of questions provide a framework of inquiring that give emphasis to what is being learned from practicing the various mindfulness-based skills.

The first layer focuses on what is being noticed. The second layer widens the field of discussion to include an attentiveness to and appreciation of the often conditioned nature of how the mind construes experience. This layer also explores connections and insights that result from being able to observe and follow this habituated process, without being triggered by it. The third layer of discussions provides the opportunity to reflect on the learning from layers one and two and how that is contributing to a different relationship to what has previously been seen to be painful, unwanted or difficult. In addition, this layer is also about making connections to the rationale and intention of the specific and overall themes of the MBSR/MBCT program.

When facilitating mindful inquiry in the first half of the MBSR/MBCT program, the teacher is attentive to collecting as many of her participants' experiences as possible. This is done with a light touch. By collecting these responses from the participants in the early sessions, a teacher will be able to illuminate an understanding of the universality of the wandering mind, highlight common reactive patterns of thinking, emotions and behaviors, and how the mind can be driven by thoughts about the past and worries for the future.

In the early sessions of these mindfulness-based programs, the teacher is also increasing understanding about habituated reactions to what we like, don't like or equally are neutral to. She is revealing how many of the more problematic reactions come from concepts that coalesce around the story of I, me or mine. Once this is recognized and experienced through mindfulness practices the possibility of de-fusing or de-centering from the narrative of this story is unlocked.

In the second half of the MBSR/MBCT program, the teacher continues to draw out universal experiences, but she is now exploring with individual participant's specific connections they are making about developing a different relationship to what has previously been perceived as difficult or even unwanted.

In *Layer 1* the MBSR/MBCT teacher is emphasizing a particular form of noticing, an intentional mindful awareness towards all experience. For a teacher this means she is highlighting a particular way of attending that includes recognizing what is here, acknowledging its presence and allowing space for it. Embodying an intentional non-judgmental curiosity, the teacher demonstrates that the landscape of mind, mood, body and the senses is constantly shifting and changing within the field of noticing. Thoughts and emotions are explored as they interrelate to and within the field of sensory awareness. By bringing a gentle but deliberate focus to specific

objects of observation, moments of connection and dis-connection are made explicit in the moment of noticing.

Questions: *What did you notice? What are/were you aware of? What is/was present? What showed up?*

In **Layer 2**, the MBSR/MBCT teacher is widening the field of noticing and awareness and supporting the development of mindful participatory observation. In this phase, she is exploring with the participant(s) what is being noticed (Layer 1) in relationship to what is being observed about the nature of mind (Layer 2) when it meets such characteristics as a wandering/distracted/bored/anxious/sad mind. It is also about becoming aware of thought patterns, emotional responses and conditioned behaviors that arise when we become unsettled and widening the field of awareness to include these observations.

By embodying a whole-hearted gentle and open friendliness to the recognition of the patterns of conditioning, a teacher demonstrates the possibility of developing a different relationship to what is being noticed regardless of whether it is pleasant, unpleasant or being perceived as neutral. This paradigm shift moves away from problem solving, avoidance or rumination to being with and allowing for. This in turn facilitates and strengthens the ability to discern what is being perceived without engaging in the desire to push away, struggle with or avoid the difficult; so rather than reacting and repeating old unhelpful patterns of mind/heart the ground for different choices and new responses is born.

Question: *How might this be different from how you/one/we normally pay attention?*

In **Layer 3**, the MBSR/MBCT teacher is exploring the integration of learning from Layers 1 and 2 into a wider context. She is linking noticing, awareness and learning. By skillfully holding these three threads, the teacher facilitates the participant's understanding and integration of their own observations and recognition of habitual patterns with the learning and insights that arises out of intentional awareness. This layer of questions incorporates the underlying philosophy of mindfulness meditation, the usefulness of mindfulness-based practices, and how this is beneficial in terms of symptom reduction, prevention and general well-being. With this layer, the teacher is listening for these moments in dialogue with the participant so that learning takes place from the experience of rather than a teaching to. It is often a fine edge.

Questions: *How might this help you/one/us stay well? How might this reduce stress? How might this contribute to a sense of well-being?*

To summarize: The function of this layered questioning is . . .

- To inquire into what participants are noticing during mindfulness practice, to support reflection on these experiences, and to explore the effects of bringing a mindfulness perspective to experience.
- To discuss and explore what is being observed, to track experience using the paradigm of mindfulness as a platform to highlight what is being revealed.
- To connect these observations to the underlying principles of the mindfulness-based program as well as to an expanded vision and basis for well-being.

There is always an inherent danger in any structure of questioning becoming formulaic. It is therefore helpful to be reminded that any ‘method’ of questioning is always embedded in a process that reveals a present moment experience founded on the principles of mindfulness.

These principles are always an informing presence guiding a teacher in her understanding of the practice of inquiry. For inquiry is a constantly moving and relational mindfulness practice that is created moment by moment between the teacher and her participant(s). In listening, attending, tracking and responding to the response(s) from her participant(s), a teacher will also be monitoring and sensing the movement of sensations (thoughts, emotions, body sensations) within her own sensory field. Mindfully attuned to her participant(s), to herself, to the moment, a teacher skillfully observes an inner and outer field of mindful awareness. There will be many times when this compassionate and wise attunement informs mindful inquiry and delivers the teaching of the moment. This is the heart and spirit of mindful inquiry.

## **BROADENING THE LANDSCAPE OF INQUIRY – A CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY**

Inquiry is inherently a contemplative form of questioning. In figure 1, using the three layers of questions as a starting point, two additional components are reviewed as a way to expand and deepen an understanding of this. These are a teacher’s intention and her understanding of general mindfulness-based principles.

The first of these two components informing mindful inquiry is intention. A teacher’s focus is always to guide discussions that strengthen the observation of direct experience rather than the story about it. In addition, she will develop discussions that support and highlight insights gained from observing the mind’s relationship to what is being noticed. She will encourage the possibility of staying with experiences in the moment without avoiding them, chasing after them or pushing them away. This is then linked to universal mindfulness-based principles and to the underlying rationales of the MBSR/MBCT program.

A second important component is the teacher’s experiential understanding of mindfulness-based principles. This is something that develops over time as a teacher’s mindfulness practice and experience of teaching matures and deepens. However, it is also helpful to have an understanding of these principles early as a way to engage purposefully in the spirit and essence

of mindfulness. This can be done through attending various professional training courses, supervision, mindfulness meditation retreats, through books, articles and audio formats.

| The characteristics of mindful inquiry   | Teacher intention   | Mindfulness-Based Principles  |
|--|---|---|
| <p><b><i>Layer 1: Developing intentional awareness/bringing awareness to experience, noticing.</i></b><br/>           Questions: What did you notice? What showed up?</p>  | <p>Supporting and strengthening the observing of direct experience; the opposite of ‘automatic pilot’.</p>  | <p>A present moment orientation; a particular form of attending that is allowing, steady, warm, and genuinely curious. Supporting and developing ‘bare attention’.</p>  |
| <p><b><i>Layer 2: Widening the field of noticing and awareness, developing the mindful participant observer, a discussion based on a mindfulness perspective.</i></b><br/>           Questions: How is this different from how you normally pay attention? And then what did you notice?</p>   | <p>Exploring the effects of bringing an intentional awareness to direct experience (layer 1) with what is being observed about the mind’s relationship to what is being noticed (layer 2); tracking experience.</p> | <p>Impermanence; the truth of change. De-centering from the story of ‘I’, me, mine. The role of kindness, equanimity, compassion when recognizing the conditioned nature and habits of mind. The platform of mindfulness from which to engage in a different relationship to suffering.</p> |
| <p><b><i>Layer 3: Exploring the integration of learning from Layers 1 and 2 into a wider context of learning, making connections</i></b><br/>           Questions: How does what we are practicing have to do with preventing depression relapse? How might this help us stay well? Reduce stress? Contribute to our well-being?</p> | <p>Integrating the learning from layers 1 &amp; 2 from a mindfulness perspective and how that relates to the underlying principles of the program and general well-being.</p>                                       | <p>Understanding the roots of suffering. Active self-compassion. A different relationship to ‘difficult’ modes of mind. Implementing different choices. Behavior change.</p>  |

Figure 1: The Characteristics of mindful inquiry

In conclusion, it is helpful to remember that these kinds of questions that promote curiosity and investigation are offering the participants of an MBSR/MBCT program a contemplative engagement in noticing the moving landscape of mind and heart. Mindful inquiry points to the experience of change without needing to do anything to it. It is this that ultimately illuminates insight and transformation.

### References

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NOTE: For structural ease I have used the feminine pronoun, 'she' when referring to MBSR/MBCT teachers to describe all gender orientations.

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