The formative role of retreats in my development as a mindfulness teacher: An autoethnographic enquiry

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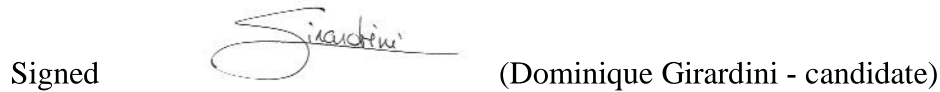
Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.



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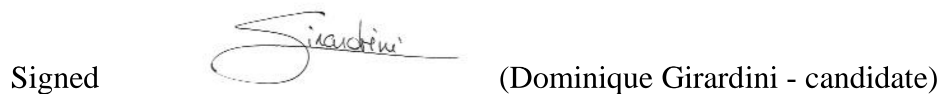
Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.



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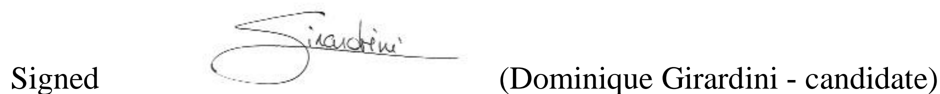

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Abstract

Although the mindfulness training community strongly endorses annual 7-day silent retreats for both trainee and experienced teachers, published research on their impact on teacher development is very limited. The researcher uses an autoethnographic methodology to investigate her own experiences of 4 such retreats that she attended during the course of her mindfulness teacher training. She examines if and how these retreats contributed to her development as a mindfulness teacher, and in particular to her capacity for embodiment of the practice. The study found that immersion into practice enhanced her present-moment awareness and led to a deepening of her connection with the body. Although retreat circumstances brought on a heightening of psycho-emotional reactivity, they also provided the framework and support – through both the containment of retreat structures and the holding and guidance by retreat leaders – needed to meet these challenges, thus engendering a deepening of trust in practice. The study fully supports the mindfulness profession's requirement for attendance of silent retreats and contrasts the researcher's experience of Mindfulness Based Intervention (MBI) retreats with more traditional Buddhist-style ones. It recommends that trainee teachers attend MBI-style retreats so that they may experience and benefit from their full relational dimension.

Introduction

The last two decades have seen a considerable growth in the popularity of Mindfulness-Based Programmes (MBPs) in the UK, which have increasingly found their way into many different domains of society, including education, health, workplace and justice (Crane et al., 2017). The consequential exponential increase in the demand for mindfulness teachers has fuelled an expansion of teacher training. Out of a concern to guarantee overall consistency and reliability in the provision of mindfulness teaching, training institutions have organised as professional bodies with a view to formalising training requirements, establishing standards for good practice and standardising assessment of criteria for competence. To meet this aim, the UK Network for Mindfulness-Based Teacher Training Organisations (UKN) has defined standards for mindfulness teachers (UK Network for Mindfulness-Based Teacher Training Organisations, 2015). These include both training requirements and ongoing Good Practice Guidelines that teachers must adhere to, if they are to gain and retain the organisation’s seal of approval. In parallel, a team from the main institutions across the UK teacher training profession collaborated on the development of the Mindfulness-Based Interventions Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI:TAC), which provide a comprehensive framework for assessing the competence of trainee teachers and the integrity of their teaching (Crane, Soulsby, Kuyken, Williams & Eames, 2016).

Mindfulness, as taught in MBPs, is understood as the awareness that emerges from meeting our experience as it unfolds moment by moment with deliberate and non-judgmental attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2013). By way of historical background, the first secular mindfulness programme, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was developed by Kabat-Zinn in a medical environment in the 1970s. It was aimed at relieving suffering and fostering ease of being in patients with chronic conditions (Kabat-

Zinn, 1990). The programme has since been successfully disseminated in other contexts. In the 1990s, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), an adaptation of the programme which includes elements of cognitive psychology, was developed with the aim of preventing depression relapse (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2013). There are now many offshoots of both these programmes to address a range of specific needs and populations. The researcher teaches generic programmes in both MBSR and MBCT. Mindfulness is learnt experientially in a structured course facilitated by a teacher. Both MBSR and MBCT programmes consist of eight 2 (or 2½) hour sessions and one whole day of practice. Each session includes guided practice, group enquiry – verbal exploration of the participants' experience of the practice – and some didactic teaching.

The mindfulness teacher is required to possess certain pedagogical skills but also, most crucially, to have the capacity to embody mindfulness practice, a core teaching competence referred to as "embodiment" in the MBI:TAC (Crane et al., 2016). Embodiment is defined as the teacher's ability "to inhabit the practice of mindfulness" (Crane et al., 2016, p. 55). Embodiment grows out of the teacher's continued engagement with their mindfulness practice, and as such, is an emergent quality (Crane, 2016). Over time, the teacher becomes so intimate with the process that (s)he integrates it as a way of being. Present moment awareness and responsiveness, authentic presence, capacity to embody attitudinal qualities (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) such as acceptance, trust and non-fixing, and ability to be present with difficult experiences and hold them in compassionate awareness are all characteristics of a teacher's embodiment. (Crane et al., 2016).

The teacher's quality of embodiment is widely believed to be essential for the effectiveness of the programme (Crane et al., 2016; Crane et al., 2017; Segal et al, 2013). This has been corroborated by a qualitative study exploring the role of the teacher in MBPs,

which used triangulation of interview results with participants, teachers, and observers of MBCT sessions (van Aalderen, Breukers, Reuzel, & Speckens, 2014). The authors identified four main themes that characterise the teacher-participant relationship in an MBP, namely embodiment of practice by the teacher, empowerment, non-reactivity and peer support and concluded that the evidence for the importance of embodiment was particularly convincing. They recommend additional studies to investigate further how this quality influences the outcomes for the MBP participants.

To ensure that teachers develop this capacity for embodiment and continue to cultivate it, the UKN requires in its Good Practice Guidelines for teaching Mindfulness-Based Courses (UK Network for Mindfulness-Based Teacher Training Organisations, 2015) that teachers commit to daily formal and informal mindfulness practice, and that they participate in a yearly teacher-led residential meditation retreat during and after training. In the US, the Center for Mindfulness (CFM)– the home of MBSR – requires in its Principles and Standards the same commitments of its teachers (Kabat-Zinn et al., 2011).

In a collective paper, where they set out criteria for good standards for MBP teacher training, the heads of leading teacher training centres in the UK advocated participation of trainees in meditation retreats, arguing that they enable “a qualitatively different experience” (Crane, Kuyken, Hastings, Rothwell & Williams, 2010, p. 8) to that of time-limited everyday practice, and that they give access to the exploration of different aspects and layers of experience. In a more recent paper defining the main characteristics of MBPs, which brought together leading British and American mindfulness figures, the centrality of a teacher’s experiential engagement with practice was reaffirmed, and the need for teachers to maintain a daily practice and to participate in retreats for periods of intensive practice was reiterated (Crane et al., 2017).

Kabat-Zinn, in an influential reflective paper (2011) in which he affirms the origins of MBSR in Buddhist teachings, insists on "the absolute necessity" (p. 296) for teachers to attend regular week-long retreats to strengthen their practice and acquire an intimate understanding of it. Indeed, MBPs have developed from the confluence of two epistemologies, namely Western science (in particular its medical and psychological understandings of mind-body processes) and early Buddhist teachings with their tradition of contemplative practice (Crane, 2017). In line with the Buddhist tradition where meditative practice is a central pillar in the cultivation of wisdom on the path to enlightenment (Rāhula, 1974), an MBP teacher's commitment to practice is crucial to ensuring the integrity and hence transformational power of the approach they teach. Kabat-Zinn encourages teachers to grow "a deep experience-based confidence in the practice" (2003, p. 150), stemming from intense engagement with the process and confronting of such difficulties that may arise. Only when they have acquired this trust in the practice, will teachers be able to instil it authentically in their participants. Silent meditation retreats provide a contained structure held by experienced practitioners in which trainee teachers can delve deeper into practice.

Indeed, retreat structures offer participants the opportunity to step out of *doing mode of mind* - goal-oriented, discrepancy-monitoring, and analytic – and experience that of *being* – present moment-centred, spacious, and allowing – (Segal et al., 2013). Concretely, residential silent retreats offer a programme of intensive formal practice, which generally alternates periods of sitting and walking meditation. Alongside, the long hours of practice, the commitment to silence and the simplified lifestyle bring on an enhanced sense of presence, clarity and attentiveness to inner and outer environment in the retreatant, which is referred to as "informal practice" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Hence, the retreat participant is at all times engaged in practice, whether formal or informal. Furthermore, most retreat teachers

give a daily talk on aspects of the practice and offer short individual interviews at various points in the retreat. These one-to-one meetings are opportunities for the retreatant to come out of silence and converse with the teacher about any difficulty that they may be experiencing, and thus receiving the benefits of the teacher's empathic presence and their guidance with practice. The sparse environment and intensive practice provide a laboratory for self-enquiry, as habitual mental and emotional patterns inevitably arise and are consciously felt and compassionately explored. Retreatants are supported in turning to the difficult aspects of their experience by the containment of the retreat structures – a safe, enclosed environment, a set programme for practice, all physical needs being taken care of and so on – and the holding of the retreat leaders. That holding is expressed through their embodied presence, some guidance and brief dialogues as part of the individual interviews.

It is interesting to note that there is a debate in the mindfulness community as to which form of retreats are best suited for mindfulness teachers, including trainees. Kabat-Zinn and the CFM have advocated traditional Buddhist-style retreats with *dharma* teachings to explore the lineage of the MBIs (Kabat-Zinn 2010; 2011, Kabat-Zinn et al, 2011), whereas others recommend retreats run by teachers from the mindfulness community. Amongst this second group, Cullen (2011) values both the emphasis on the body as gateway to the present moment and the democratic, non-hierarchical ethos of the mindfulness approach; this latter manifesting in particular in retreat teachers' participation in all activities alongside retreatants. McCown (2013) has further developed this latter aspect and theorised it in his model of the "ethical space" of the MBIs, which views the process of mindfulness as "a co-creation of the gathering of participants" (p. 202) and hence, a relational accomplishment. He believes that this co-creation cannot be achieved in Buddhist-style retreats, which are missing some of the MBI qualities, and calls for MBI-style retreats.

There is a growing body of evidence confirming that meditation retreats are beneficial to mindfulness practitioners in general. Khoury, Knaüper, Schlosser, Carrière and Chiesa (2017) carried out a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effectiveness of meditation retreats on psychological outcomes in general populations, which showed that they are effective in reducing stress, anxiety and depression measures, and in improving the perceived quality of life of participants. King, Conklin, Zanesco and Saron (2019) examined a number of studies that reported improvements in both cognitive outcomes, such as the ability to focus attention for extended periods of time (e.g. Zanesco, King, Maclean & Saron, 2013) and in associated physiological markers, for example telomere length (Conklin et al., 2018).

However, the impact of retreat experiences on the development and competence of mindfulness teachers has been very little researched. An exception is the study by Ruijgrok-Lupton, Crane and Dorjee (2017), which concluded that whilst the number of years of teacher training had a significant impact on self-reported outcomes (well-being and reduction in stress) for MBSR course participants, the number of retreat days that the teacher had attended had no further significant impact on the measures reported. It should be noted that this study included only nine teachers, and that even the less experienced cohort of teachers had already participated in 48 days of retreat on average, which may have sufficiently developed their capacity for embodiment. No other studies that have quantitively investigated the link between retreat experience and teacher effectiveness have been found. In addition, the literature does not contain any subjective accounts that describe how retreat experiences influence the maturing process of teachers.

Therefore, the present research addresses this gap. Using autoethnographic enquiry as a methodology, it explores and analyses the most significant aspects of the researcher's retreat experiences whilst she was training as a teacher. It investigates how each of the four

retreats that she attended during that period has met the researcher's developmental needs at the time, and contributed to her process of maturation as a mindfulness practitioner and teacher. The study also aims to investigate and clarify the processes through which the attendance of retreats fosters the understanding and integration of mindfulness practice and the maturation of particular qualities, such as the capacity for embodiment of the practice. It is hoped that this autoethnographic study will further the understanding of the function and importance of trainee mindfulness teachers participating in retreats.

Method

Participants

As this research uses an autoethnographic approach, the researcher is the sole participant. She is a white woman of non-British heritage in her late fifties, who has been working as a psychotherapist for two decades, and started training to teach Mindfulness-Based Approaches (MBAs) in 2013.

Research design

This study is in the form of an autoethnographic enquiry, which is a personal reflective approach that centres on the researcher's lived experience and engages with it with a view to eliciting insight into a cultural or societal phenomenon (Wall, 2006). This approach allows for the exploration of quite complex and nuanced aspects of experience, addressing emotional and embodied perspectives as well as cognitive ones (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015). The researcher believes that the method lends itself well to investigating the process of mindfully engaging with experience with all its multiple intricate layers, as practiced on meditation retreats.

The autoethnographic process addresses both personal and cultural spheres, which it considers as inseparable and interdependent (Wall, 2006). Accordingly, the exploration of a personal subjective experience serves the understanding of that experience at a collective level. For this study, the cultural framework of understanding is that of MBAs as taught at the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice (CMRP) at Bangor University.

Procedure

The researcher has conducted a literature search via the Google Scholar search engine, using terms such as "role of retreats in mindfulness teacher training" and "mindfulness meditation retreats and embodiment", in order to set her own research within the current understanding of the profession and the existing body of research on this topic. Awareness of this background informed and enhanced her reflective processes. In the next stage, the researcher reviewed her data corpus. The main source of data consists of journal entries made during and just after the four retreats the researcher attended in the course of her teacher training. Retreat 1 happened in 2015 as the researcher was taking her first teacher training module as part of her MSc in MBAs. Retreat 2 took place in 2016 when the researcher paused her studies in order to teach her first MBA course. Retreat 3 occurred in 2017 as the researcher resumed teacher training alongside running courses. Finally, Retreat 4 happened in 2018 when teacher training took the form of an intensive residential week. These four retreats were all 7-day long silent retreats; the fourth one was restricted to mindfulness teachers whether in training or not, whereas the first three were not.

As retreat participants are discouraged from pursuing any writing, few entries were recorded during the retreat themselves, apart from those pertaining to Retreat 4, which the researcher documented comprehensively for the purpose of this project. However, post-retreat journal entries are in each instance extensive. Other data sources include the Retreat

Learning Statements drafted after Retreats 1 and 3 as course requirements, email communications to friends, photographs and drawings. The researcher also examined retrospective memories of the most salient aspects of her experience, which have left a distinct and powerful embodied imprint.

Throughout the process of data review and analysis, the researcher documented and monitored her own process through keeping a new journal. This was intended to enhance her awareness of the choices she makes and the rationales underpinning them, as well as being a tool for self-reflection – and hence self-care – on how she is impacted by the material she engages with. Finally, the researcher contextualised her results within the cultural perspective of the mindfulness teacher training community.

Ethical considerations

An ethics application (2019-16466) was approved by the School of Psychology's Research Ethics Committee. One of the two main areas highlighted in that application was associated with the potential distress to the researcher that the nature of autoethnographic enquiry may cause. Revealing one's intimate experience to others may bring up a fear of being judged and feelings of vulnerability, inadequacy and even shame (Wall, 2008). In addition, the evoking of difficult experiences may reactivate their emotional charge and could cause the researcher distress (Adams et al., 2015). The researcher, being a psychotherapist who has undertaken over a decade of weekly therapy, has very good insights into her own inner world, and into her affective and cognitive mechanisms. The researcher devised and applied a supportive protocol which included keeping a journal for self-reflection, regular supervision with both her mindfulness and thesis supervisors, and daily mindfulness practice to cultivate clarity and resource herself.

The other main area for consideration was the need to maintain confidentiality of third parties such as other retreat participants and retreat teachers. The researcher mentions the essence of some of the exchanges that she had with retreat teachers during scheduled interviews. Yet, her focus is always her interpretation of what was said, rather than giving a verbatim account. The research stays within the bounds of the researcher's inner experience. When the gist of a conversation is alluded to, it is as seen through the lens of the researcher's subjectivity. No retreat participants, retreat names, or retreat centres are named. The anonymity of retreat teachers is protected by using various devices such as anonymising and collapsing of events (Tullis, 2016). Furthermore, handwritten documents relevant to the research were kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's desk. Electronic data was anonymised and protected by a double password.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In an autoethnography, data analysis and interpretation are the processes that enable assembled autobiographical data to morph into an intelligible "account of observed phenomena" (Chang, 2008, p. 126), with the capacity to inform a specific cultural context. Autoethnography is often criticised for lacking methodological exactitude and not being systematic enough (Wall, 2006). However, one can argue that autoethnography is multiform and accommodates a large range of approaches with varying degrees of fidelity to traditional analytic methods.

At the more traditional end, lies Anderson's analytic autoethnography (2006) which is greatly concerned with placing the subjective experience of the individual within the context of their social and cultural environment. At the other, more innovative, end, we find Ellis and Bochner's evocative autoethnography which considers the process of research to be a journey of discovery and which privileges "dwell[ing] in the flux of lived experience" (2006, p. 431).

It uses a descriptive literary approach to create a vivid style of narration and seeks to inform the reader by bringing them into the author's experience through emotional resonance (Ellis, 1999).

As the researcher finds value in both these approaches, both evocative and analytic styles are integrated in this study and utilised to process data. The narration of personal experience aims to be evocative, whilst care is taken to ensure that the research is embedded in, and informed by its cultural context of MBAs. It also should be mentioned that a criticism often directed at the autoethnographic approach is that it can be too autobiographical and self-indulgent (Atkinson, 1997). The analytic perspective supported the researcher in maintaining awareness of this pitfall and she monitored her research for pertinence to the broader context of mindfulness teacher training.

A key component of the process of data analysis was heuristic enquiry, which informed the work throughout. This is defined by Douglass and Moustakas (1985) as "a search for the meaning and essence in significant human experience" which is carried out through a process of "reflecting, exploring, sifting, and elucidating, the nature of the process under investigation" (p. 140). Reflective practice was central to the researcher's analysis. Inevitably, the researcher had operated a first selection when she chose what to record in her journal entries. She wrote about the most salient aspects of her experience with a view to drawing meaning and learning from them. This process of selection to elicit the most relevant aspects of the data corpus continued and was approached consciously and reflectively. The data analysis process focuses on identifying the principal features of the data and systematically describing how they relate to each other (Chang, 2008). To that purpose, the researcher examined the data for potential themes and reflected on them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The corpus of data was read through several times in a search for patterns of meaning

and recurrent themes. An inductive approach was used, which involves allowing themes to emerge from the data.

The researcher then proceeded with data interpretation. Data analysis and data interpretation are intimately intertwined (Wolcott, as cited in Chang, 2008). However, the data interpretation process focuses more on extracting cultural meanings from the data corpus (Chang, 2008). Thus, the researcher related the themes identified by the method described above to the original aims of the study and to the cultural framework in which the research is embedded (i.e. the findings of the literature review and the researcher's understanding of the processes underpinning mindfulness practice).

The researcher adopted a provisional investigative framework for this as follows:

1. Have the researcher's experiences on retreats played a role in her development as a mindfulness teacher?
2. Which experiences in particular have strengthened and deepened her understanding and integration of mindfulness practice, hence her capacity for embodiment of it?
3. What was it about these experiences that brought that about?
4. What was it about the manner in which these experiences were met in the retreat context that enhanced embodiment?
5. What was it about the retreat context that gave rise to these experiences?
6. Did certain retreats bring more formative experiences than others and did any particular features contribute to this?

Whilst the researcher was open to refining this provisional framework in the light of the results from the data analysis phase if additional salient themes were identified, this did not prove necessary.

The analysis and interpretation processes were grounded within the cultural context of the mindfulness teacher community and the data were processed and interpreted using mindfulness frames of understanding. As stated in the Procedure section, a journal was kept throughout the research process in order to document this analysis, increase awareness of the various aspects of the process and explain the rationale informing choices made.

Results

Run-up to First Retreat

From the moment that I embarked on the journey of personal, professional, and academic development that is the MSc in Mindfulness-Based Approaches, I was aware that, by taking the teacher-training pathway, I would be required from the second year onwards to attend a 7-day silent retreat. This prospect inspired both fear and excitement in me. I had experienced the silent day retreat, which is part of the core MBSR/MBCT programme several times, and very much valued this opportunity for stepping away from my usual *mode of doing* into the space of silent practice which facilitated access to the *mode of being* (Segal, et al., 2013). However, that was for a day; I had real concerns about what a whole week of silence would be like.

I noticed two main threads of anxious thinking, the first one related to my Chronic Fatigue Syndrome condition (CFS); would I be able to cope with the early rise and the long hours of practice? The other thread was more difficult to see clearly because it felt so threatening that I did not allow myself to consider it for very long. In my psychotherapeutic training, I had heard about experiences of *spiritual emergency* (Grof & Grof, 2017) when

periods of intense spiritual practice brought about, in psychologically vulnerable people, a dissolving of ego boundaries (Federn, 1953) – a loss of the capacity to distinguish between the real and the unreal – such that it might lead to some sort of psychotic episode. Having experienced trauma as a child and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) as an adult, I was not so sure about the solidity of my sense of self in these circumstances. The thought of losing control of my hard-earned sense of inner boundaries filled me with dread and I vowed to do my utmost to keep myself safe.

However, this first retreat contained enough familiar aspects to offer me some reassurance that I was not stepping out into complete darkness. I was already familiar with the residential centre, with one of the two retreat leaders, and a good half of the participants were fellow students on my Teaching 1 course. My intentions for the retreat were to find out what a week-long silent retreat was like, and as best I could to keep myself safe. As part of this personal brief, I decided to keep a retreat journal in the hope that this would help me processing my ongoing experience, in spite of the leaders' recommendation not to write during the retreat.

Retreat 1

The body as a gateway to the processing of heightened emotional reactivity.

I soon realised that the suspension of *doing mode*, combined with the enforced silence and redirection of attention inwards experienced on retreats, brought a heightening of personal emotional reactivity. Old emotional patterns were reactivated by seemingly anodyne circumstances. On the first and second days, I was very aware of the presence of other participants. As stated before, they were largely familiar to me, a few were close friends. Yet, we had committed to silence and had been instructed to avoid making eye-contact and smiling at each other. Soon, I noticed in me a growing feeling of sadness and emotional

insecurity. On exploring this feeling further in my journal, a sense of being cut-off, estranged, and of feeling unloved was elicited, as if I was being shunned. I was feeling very young, vulnerable, and yearning for some sort of contact such as a smile or a touch. I knew this state well, it is an emotional experience of abandonment that I tend to experience after a separation or a significant rejection, which has its root in my childhood years. That knowledge, however, did not change how I felt.

This affective state continued to intensify. I now felt impatience and irritation at myself for feeling this way. My inner critical voice reproached me for doing so without good reason. If I had been spurned by a loved one, I might have found in myself the compassion I needed to comfort myself, but this felt ridiculous. I gave myself the "pull yourself together" treatment. Gradually and under this critical pressure, my sadness turned into anguish, threatening to engulf any remnants of the sensible adult self in me. I now feared falling into the dark abyss of no-being that I had experienced years ago after a separation.

Then, I am not sure how, during a sitting session, as the *doing mode* of the cognitive mind had retreated away, I became aware of a sensation in my chest, both an aching and a deadness there in the middle of my chest, as if there was a great gash where the flesh had been ripped away. This connected me with a spontaneous feeling of compassion and I turned my focus of awareness towards the sensation with gentleness and patience. No pushing away now, but exploring what was there with tenderness… feeling into it…breathing…feeling my feet on the ground… feeling back into it…cradling it, as best I could, with my warm compassionate presence. The sensation slowly and gradually dissipated, and as the anxiety subdued, I finally became aware of what had tipped me into this pattern. Because of retreat rules, I could not actively contribute to maintaining the social, friendship bonds I had with my fellow retreatants, by exchanging a smile, finding out how someone was, sharing a joke

or an experience, as I did in our usual environment. This gave rise to an unconscious fear that others would resent me for that and would reject me because I was not contributing anything. I also unconsciously experienced their own silence and absence of acknowledgment of me, as indifference and rejection. The embracing of my distress through the gateway of the body and the ensuing insight on the mechanism that had brought about this experience of abandonment, both brought about the dissolving of this emotional pattern.

Yet, as I had experienced for the past two days at my expense, this insight could not be reached cognitively. I had failed to work out what was happening, in spite of my good knowledge of my emotional and psychological patterns, and of all the work I had done over the years on my wounded inner child. I had needed to turn to the body, as mindfulness teaches us. I had been learning about this over the past two years, and practiced it daily. Yet, in these different circumstances, with this heightened reactivity, it took two days for me turn to the body. This experience of how old patterns can be re-activated by certain circumstances, by-passing the cognitive mind and the adult emotional configuration, and of how they can then only be accessed and processed through the body, has since remained embedded in me, both in my personal practice and as a mindfulness teacher. It has helped me to bring understanding and compassion to my MBP participants when they report seemingly unjustified distress. It also has consolidated my understanding of the appropriateness and validity of engaging with distress through the body.

Acceptance/allowing.

As the retreat went on, emotional reactivity came up time and time again. Yet, alongside this, my autonomic nervous system slowed down, switching into parasympathetic mode (Chaskalson, 2014). My mind became more spacious, things were felt more vividly but also more clearly, as if they stood out against a wide, spacious, and clear backdrop. Anxiety

around fatigue visited me time and time again, I felt vulnerable when fatigue intensified; where would this lead? Would I cope? I observed how I "grabbed" at moments of energy (tightening around) and pushed away moments of exhaustion (tightening against). Then, gradually I noticed that fatigue came and went, intensified and abated. When I was in movement or outdoors, or else absorbed in a particular experience, I felt more energy. I noticed too that when I rested, fatigue reduced. I also worried that I was not getting enough sleep. I became aware that I was trying to monitor how much I would sleep every night. I grew anxious when I could not fall asleep early enough. Then, I realised that I did not have an active role to play on the retreat, and decided to accept sleep deficiency, rather than fight it. There again, I could observe my energy waxing and waning. I formed the intention to let go into the organically ever-changing cycle of energy and not interfere with its natural fluctuations. This move away from mental monitoring into actually observing and feeling how things really are, which is practiced in mindfulness, brought a realisation that the situation was manageable just as it was, and that I could collaborate with what was already there, instead of trying to change it.

The body as a place of safety.

After guiding practice on the first day, the retreat leaders had instructed us to choose our own focus of attention for sitting practice. I instinctively gravitated to the body, in search for a place of safety. As a child, I had experienced dissociation during traumatic episodes, it is a protective mechanism used by the psyche to cope with trauma (Rothschild, 2000). In my adult life, this defence mechanism has again been triggered at times of undergoing intense periods of stress, or whenever my brain alarm system perceived a significant sense of threat. Even though it is a protective strategy by the psyche, dissociation has felt to me like a loss of self and I experience it as intensely frightening. In trauma therapy, I came to discover that

grounding in the body re-establishes a sense of safety, of “boundaried-ness” – feeling clearly where the body starts and ends, and of presence to self.

In this first retreat, in the face of the unknown, I homed in on the body. During entire practice sessions, I focused on feeling my feet on the ground, the back of my thighs and my buttocks in contact with my chair. I spent time feeling into, anchoring into, the lower half of my body, my feet, my legs; then slowly moving up into the pelvic area, relishing having nothing else to attend to than feeling into my body, feeling myself as my body.

Soon, as I realised that my body was available to me, I felt reassured. In my journal, I wrote that I was developing resources to support myself through the week-long silent voyage of the retreat. Gradually, day after day, session after session, I extended my field of exploration slowly upwards into my body. I explored the right-hand side of my body, from which I usually feel disconnected; slowly inch by inch re-inhabiting the whole of my body, bringing awareness and presence into its deserted parts. I breathed into my right lung, the front, the back, the sides, guiding my breath to create more space, stretching the intercostal muscles, reconnecting with sensations where there had been none. I continued this exploration during the daily movement practice and the mindful walking sessions. On the sixth day, I explored my middle and upper back and restored a sense of connection with it. I felt immense joy. I felt tall, wide and dense, and, even more movingly, absolutely present. I had a sense that this exploration was helping me to access a sense of a steady presence that could withstand all the storms of life.

This reconnection with my body on this first retreat strengthened my capacity for embodiment, in the most literal sense of presence in the body, which is a necessary stage for embodiment of the attitudinal qualities, values and ethics of mindfulness practice. This experience was foundational in my journey of development as a mindfulness teacher and

proved an essential resource when I came to teach my first MBI programme a few months later. It gave me the capacity to remain present in my body in the face of my own anxiety, and of whatever challenging emotions and behaviours came from my participants.

Additionally, this state of "being fully in my body" eased the exploration of emotional reactivity. On the fifth day of retreat, my throat started to feel sore. In my state of embodiment, it felt natural to bring awareness to the sensations present in my throat. I noticed some tightness there, as if there was an attempt at closing and controlling the area. As I connected with that, a sense of fear of shame spontaneously came up. I then remembered that, the previous evening during the meal, I had dropped a spoon on the floor and later spilled some food whilst serving myself from the buffet, and felt intense embarrassment at my clumsiness. An old belief was reactivated that everyone else knows how to hold themselves, except me, and I had unconsciously resolved to be more attentive and exert more control. All this was revealed as I explored the sensations of tightness in my throat, breathing into the tension, and inviting softening and opening of the clenched area on the outbreath. I then fully felt the shame that I had pushed down with the clenching – not a pleasant feeling, but bearable. I also realised that even if, as a child, shame had been experienced as a dangerous threat to self-esteem, now in the grounded, centred, expanded place in which I was abiding, I could experience it as just another emotion manifesting in the body. This was followed by a deep wave of sadness. After this exploration I felt very tired and vulnerable; I rested in bed after lunch and emerged refreshed for the afternoon session.

The heightening of reactivity experienced in the retreat environment brought about intensive practice of *working with the difficult* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal et al., 2013; Bartley, 2012), which enhanced my understanding of, familiarity with, and trust in the process. If the retreat environment heightened reactivity, it also through the silence, sustained practice and

minimal doing, supported access to a place of embodiment, clear awareness and deep connection to experience. This facilitated engagement with the difficult aspects of experience; I see this capacity to attend to the difficult as lying at the heart of the MBI approach I teach.

Retreat 2

A year later. Same residential centre, different retreat leaders and participants.

Letting go into the holding of the practice and of the retreat container.

This retreat was structured slightly differently: The practice schedule was more intensive with less free time, and interviews with retreat leaders – about 10/15 minutes long – were held daily, sometimes twice-daily. Each participant sitting in the circle was given in turn the opportunity for a private interview, with the option to pass. There was also a daily 30/40-minute time slot when the group came out of silence and participants could share with the group aspects of their experience, difficulties or questions. I found that this made other participants more "visible" and helped to create a sense of the group as an entity. Moreover, the way in and out of practice session was more formalised and ritualised.

At first, I experienced this tighter structure as a constraint, an act of regimentation. I felt entrapped by it, as if I was risking losing my sense of individuality and personal freedom. I felt mild anxiety and increased my vigilance to preserve my sense of self. During the afternoon of the second day, I suddenly felt a sense of disorientation – I could not remember which practice session we were on, was it late morning or afternoon? What day was it? How many days had I been here for? How many days did we have left? This temporal dis-orientation, brought on by the intense succession of the cycles of sitting, walking and taking a break, re-activated my fear of loss of self and of falling into a psychotic state. When my one-to-one interview came up, I shared this. The empathic presence and knowing response of the

retreat leader normalised my experience, which resulted in the fear starting to loosen its grip. I could then begin to see it more clearly for what it was. I realised that this orienting through time – which I had practiced throughout the first retreat without being aware of it – was my way of feeling that I was remaining in control. In the grounded compassionate presence of the retreat leader, I felt that I could start releasing the tight grip of control and begin to let go into the holding of the retreat structure, of the leaders, and of course of the practice itself. When I felt disorientation again, I told myself: “it’s ok to feel disoriented and to lose track of time, just this breath, this body, this moment”.

In this second retreat, I discovered how supportive the daily interviews with retreat leaders can be. During the first retreat, I was still in a mode of self-holding and I viewed the interviews as acting as a sort of safeguard, in the sense that they would allow the retreat leaders to let me know if I was going off the rails. Retrospectively, I realise that I mostly conveyed to them the message that I was in charge of my own process and could look after myself. When I shared my experience, I was somehow showing that I was a good self-reliant pupil. In this second retreat, the frequency of the meetings created more of a holding structure, of which, because I was going deeper into exploration of difficult personal material, I needed to avail myself. The leaders offered kind and empathic listening, a warm presence, and also some words, not many, usually a few sentences as guidance. I experienced these as very impactful, something to hold on to and to explore further in practice sessions. Through these daily interviews, I felt supported whilst going through my challenging experiences. I came to view these meetings as providing a life-buoy and a compass in the mental and emotional storms that I was experiencing. No theory was offered, the leaders remained mostly very close to experience, mainly providing quality of presence, co-holding of the difficult experience for the duration of the interview, and pointing to possible avenues

for investigation, very much like the mindfulness teacher holding the group of participants and conducting inquiry.

Trusting the unfolding of process – emergence out of crisis.

On the third day, my relationship with illness came to the fore. Whilst doing movement practice outdoors in the early morning, I felt myself catching a cold, which I knew from experience would inevitably bring on the intensification of fatigue. Soon afterwards as the first symptoms came on, it occurred to me that I had felt unable to prevent this from happening – by for example fetching my stole – and that all I had felt within my power was to hope that it was not actually happening. I soon associated this powerlessness and resourcelessness in the face of an aggression, with my early experiences of trauma. That morning, I had stepped back into that imprinted pattern and now I felt caught again in its straitjacket. I felt shame that I had abandoned myself and passively let this falling ill happen. This, through further rumination led me to the often-reached conclusion that I was ill because I was weak, and brought on the usual associated hopelessness. Every now and then, when connecting back with my grounded centre in practice, I could step back and see this whole pattern for what it was. Yet this awareness did not stay long and I would soon be drawn again into self-recriminating rumination and feelings of despair.

I needed help with this. It felt too big and powerful for me alone. During the next interview, again, the empathic listening of the retreat leader heartened and reassured me. They offered the metaphor of the movement of a pendulum for working with trauma, going towards it and then retreating to safety. They also suggested the possibility of investigating my construct of illness, as well as exploring my experience of it in a granular way. And I did so, really paying attention to how tiredness felt in my body and in my mind. I also noticed that there were moments when I did not feel so bad, yet was careful not to grab at them. Out

of my exploration came insights that I had caught sight of before but never seen so clearly. I realised that in the midst of tiredness, I could still enjoy birdsong, good food, the comfort of lying down in bed, if I stepped out of my ruminations and made myself available to these experiences. I was not as completely "banished from life" as I usually felt, when ill. In a way, I was familiar with the frame of investigation that the retreat leaders had offered me. Yet, I had felt so challenged that I could not access it. In that moment I needed someone else to hold it for me. It gave it more strength and validity, and besides, it got me out of my habitual pattern of forced self-reliance.

Afterwards, as I was pursuing these various threads of enquiry, I also realised that I was unconsciously hoping for a healing by the end of the retreat, a resolution of my chronic fatigue condition, a "well ever after" outcome. I noticed that I was tensing around that desired outcome and supported myself in letting go of that too. I reminded myself not to condition the value of my discoveries around my experience of illness on whether my health improved. I could accept my limitations, yet find more margin for manoeuvre within them. I realised that I could be with whatever fatigue there was if I did not get absorbed by my usual mental patterns (dramatization, self-blame and self-denigration, eternalising, wishing it was different).

My experience in this second retreat confirmed my earlier perception that retreat conditions seem to enhance the activation of old patterns, and that practice and the holding container (structure and retreat leaders' embodied presence) facilitate seeing them more clearly and working with them. They are not gone forever but they are now better known and not so charged. They become less menacing for self-integrity. They no longer need to be repressed in fear of overwhelm, they can be engaged with. Out of this engagement, often arises a new understanding of these contents and a new relationship with them. This

experience not only helped me in my own personal process and practice, but it also instilled in me a deeper trust of the process of mindful enquiry.

This trust has supported me in holding a clear, safe, and compassionate space for my participants, and in offering a more skilful guidance when I lead the enquiry process. As a result, I have become less controlling of the process of enquiry, more disposed to stepping out of the way of its natural unfolding, and more able to refrain from pointing to where it should go. I have felt less of a need to keep participants on familiar, undemanding territory. In addition, my exploration of fatigue has led me to be less anxious and more accepting when I am tired and have to teach. I maintain a sense that I can still access my resources as a teacher even in such circumstances.

Retreat 3

This took place a year later in the same residential centre and with the same retreat leaders as Retreat 2.

Becoming aware of aversion and embracing the unwanted.

In the first few days, as I refrained from engaging with deliberate discursive thinking, that would take away from the present moment, I noticed that my mental space was taken over by a lot of *doing mind* activity. My mind was constantly occupied by dithering over simple decisions such as whether to have some dessert, what to do during the post-lunch break, whether to lie down or go for a stroll, and how long a stroll, and so on. I experienced a constant inner chatter and a lot of thinking ahead to the next meal or the next break. Soon, I became very irritated and impatient with myself. Underlying this reaction was the half-formed belief that I had come here to practice mindfulness, to have a spiritually meaningful experience, acquire profound insights, and hopefully find peace. And here I was, finding myself continuously preoccupied with trivia!

Alongside that, I became aware of a lot of thoughts and emotions in relation to other retreatants. Feelings of annoyance, of envy, judgements of others and of myself, often idealising them and denigrating myself, came into the space cleared by the stillness and silence. I felt annoyed and embarrassed by that too; I viewed these thoughts and emotions as immature and petty. I did not like them: They were unworthy of the mindfulness teacher I had become. Furthermore, I did not like what these thoughts and feelings said about me, I was not the kind of person who has these sorts of thoughts. On the afternoon of the second day, I brought this up in my interview. Again, the warm, empathic, and amused presence of the retreat leader felt reassuring, comforting and normalising. And to my question about what I was supposed to do with all this chatter that was driving me mad, they simply responded by smiling and holding their arms in a circle to form a wide embrace. As I left my interview, I felt a little disappointed. Was that all? I had wanted to analyse the nature of these thoughts and investigate why they were present. Yet this would have resulted in even more "doing mind" activity, getting me further stuck in, when a more skilful response was to create space for these thoughts. As I sat back in practice, I slowly realised that I had got trapped in a struggle against these mental contents and that my aversive reaction was making it worse.

Through that gesture of embrace made by the retreat leader, I could reconnect to that place in me, which can hold this spacious, accepting, compassionate awareness. When I withdrew my aversive reaction, these contents just came and went without causing any reactivity. They were remnants of past emotional and mental habits, and they did not define who I was. I could now observe how these judgements were based on very little substance, and how they kept changing over time – a reminder of the insubstantial and transient nature of thoughts. Until this episode, I had naïvely believed that I had become fluent with the stance of non-judgmental acceptance and allowing that I had started teaching, and that it had

now become second nature. Yet this experience revealed that, in the face of these “petty” primitive patterns, I could not see that I was a having an aversive reaction. I wondered how much more of my aversion I was ordinarily blanking out. I also remembered that this is human, ingrained in all of us, just something that we have to keep on working with. Mindfulness teaches us that nothing is acquired or set forever and invites us to keep engaging with our experience with *beginner’s mind* (Kabbat-Zinn, 1990).

This experience was humbling and refreshing for me as a teacher, in that it led me to become aware of the unconscious assumption that I had formed that since I was now teaching I had “arrived” as a mindfulness practitioner. It unveiled in me the misconstruction that my mindfulness practice was a “finished product”, so to speak. It also raised the question of whether I had started practicing on automatic pilot. It encouraged me to keep on looking at my practice and my beliefs about myself as a practitioner who is now a teacher, and to bring meta-awareness to how I practice.

Struggle with impermanence and further letting go facilitated by somatic resonance.

I am not sure how this came about, but in the inner space that gradually opened up in the course of the retreat, came feelings and thoughts relating to impermanence. As I move into late middle age, a thread of anxious questioning around impermanence has been a frequent companion. I look back at my life, dizzied by how quickly years have passed, wondering how much time I have left ahead of me, and how I could make that time most meaningful. I fear the loss of loved ones, of my health and autonomy, and ultimately of life. This anxiety verges on dread when I contemplate the ineluctable movement forward of life into nothingness. I try to work it all out cognitively, but I cannot. As a reaction, I attempt to hold onto, or at least slow down, each moment of life. There is a lot of “efforting’ in order to

"seize the day" and of course, from that stance, life becomes "wasted" when I am ill, tired or not well. I also fear making mistakes about my life choices while considering my remaining years. This creates great pressure and tension.

As this issue found its way into my consciousness mid-way through the retreat, it brought with it great waves of anxiety and sadness. Alongside, came a realisation that my efforts to hold on to life were futile and induced much tension. As the hours went by, so grew my sense of anguish and powerlessness. I felt as if I was drifting with neither rudder nor anchor in a boundless void. I was seized by a sort of existential vertigo. For the next couple of days, I grappled with these questions, trying to find a resolution or a way through. I listened intently to the retreat leaders' talks in search for an answer. Nothing came. I went through waves of anger, then self-pity, and longer and longer bouts of despair, that felt more and more like the deadness of depression. I had used up all my resources: I was mentally and emotionally exhausted. I felt like the hollowed-out husk of the person I had been, I was sinking into nothingness.

Then the learning came in a form that I was not expecting, through a felt sense, an embodied experience. One evening, one of the retreat leaders read a poem about a duck sitting in the Atlantic Ocean. A few lines portrayed the duck as resting into the huge heaving waves of the vast ocean, just reposing into each wave as it comes. "He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity – which it is. He has made himself a part of the boundless by easing into just where it touches him" (Babcock, 1947, p.38). In the moment I heard these lines, through what I imagine to be a phenomenon of embodied resonance, I became that duck: I experienced resting into the moment, within the immensity of time, and the impermanence and unpredictability of life. The sense of gravity holding me, as well as the perception of feeling contained by the present moment, came through my body in the most

vivid way that I had ever experienced. In that moment, I experienced feeling grounded, safe, and contented. I felt that I was right where I was supposed to be. I was moved to tears. The darkness had lifted and I understood that, if I chose to, I could rest in every moment that comes and let impermanence be impermanence. The metaphor had become alive in my body-mind and, in that felt sense, I had found what I had I been searching for. I don't need to constantly orient, assess, and project ahead; all I need to do is to rest into the wave that is holding me up right now.

When I stopped searching intellectually, the insight came as an embodied experience, as so often in mindfulness practice. If I had been told to rest in the moment, the words would not have reached me; part of me would have argued back, whilst another part would have "efforted" to get there. Yet the poem took me into an experiential, embodied experience which reached what Mary Oliver so skilfully called the "soft animal of the body" (1986, p. 14) inside me, and which my body now knows and remembers. For the developing mindfulness teacher in me, this experience imprinted the capacity "to drop into the moment" somatically, and it gave me a way to sit a little more comfortably with impermanence. I can recall the sensation of the duck sitting in the waves whenever I become anxious and agitated and need to connect back to the present moment and let myself rest into it. This experience on Retreat 3 also exemplified the importance of felt-sense experiences and somatic resonance in the learning of mindfulness. It encouraged me to place more trust in the power of a metaphor, a few chosen lines from a poem, and into embodied resonance, and to refrain from throwing too many words at my participants as I had tended to.

For the next 24 hours, I felt an intense aliveness, which was not about seizing or making the most of, but more about letting go into a profound presence. My senses grew more and more receptive, and I delighted in a thousand sensations. After lunch, I spent my

free time lying down on the grass, looking up at the sky, watching the foliage of trees swaying in the wind, insects fluttering about in the air, listening to birdsong, and feeling the breeze and the warmth of the sun on my skin. I experienced a sense of timelessness, just like I used to as a child on a long summer day. I felt that I had found my way into a realm which transcends notions of impermanence and timelessness, perhaps William Blake's "eternity in an hour" (1874, p. 145). I felt gratitude for the richness of the moment that I was living. I knew that it would pass, and that the best I could do was to be open to it, while it was available. Indeed, the next day brought a new wave of reactivity, as I found suspicious-looking insects in my bed. Yet, I could now hold that reactivity more easily within a kind and spacious awareness. These things did not mean so much about me personally, I could see them more clearly as mental and emotional content. I had been resourced by my experience of the past 24 hours and I felt that I had grown larger. This retreat had worked like an elixir, re-energising and "oxygenating" my practice. I felt more aligned with mindful attitudes, and better able to embody them in my teaching.

Retreat 4

A year later. A different residential centre and different retreat leaders.

Dharma teaching versus holding and co-creating.

Because of an unplanned medical appointment, I had to arrive at the retreat a couple of hours after the start-time. I asked the organisers' administrator to inform the retreat leaders that I would miss the welcoming session. I arrived during the evening meal and was met by a member of staff from the residential centre who led me to my room and referred me to a board showing the retreat schedule. From my earlier retreats, I was used to retreat leaders greeting each participant in person during the first meal, in the way mindfulness teachers greet their participants individually as they arrive on the first day of the course. Yet, nobody

from the retreat came to greet me, and I did not introduce myself to the leaders either, probably out of shyness, and from my ingrained habit of self-reliance. I turned up for the first sitting session, hoping that there would be some sort of briefing, but we went straight into silent practice. With hindsight, I understand that this briefing must have taken place in the welcoming session. In any case, this situation meant that I did not know what procedures to follow to communicate in case of need (usually a board where retreatants can leave messages for the retreat assistant) nor, for that matter, who was the assistant. Over the course of the retreat, this situation ended up having quite an impact on me, resulting in my feeling unsettled and insufficiently held by the retreat container. Moreover, interviews only came in on the fourth day, and, to start with, were offered in groups of seven. These times with the teachers, it turned out, were mostly used by other participants to ask questions relating to the leaders' talks. Only in the final days of the retreat was there a chance to have an individual interview.

Unlike in my former retreats, retreat leaders did not eat their meals with the retreatants, they did not participate in walking practice, and there was no group movement practice to start the day. The leaders also sat on an elevated platform. All this contributed to creating a sense of separateness and of a hierarchy between retreat leaders and participants. Talks by the retreat leaders were a prominent feature. These were given twice a day (for about two hours altogether) and were steeped in the Buddhist tradition. In the morning, the leaders reviewed the different forms of practicing mindfulness meditation, and every day offered a different focus for exploration (body, feelings, mind, mindset). The evening talks explored aspects of the dharma, the traditional Buddhist framework underpinning mindfulness. These talks were of a very high standard, clear, precise, elaborately prepared, and very instructive. Both leaders were erudite scholars and talented speakers, and I

appreciated that. Yet, I felt that they were not holding a transformative and healing space in the way that I had experienced before. I admired their scholarship but did not feel their holding presence. All in all, it was a different style of retreat from what I had been used to, more of a Buddhist-style retreat than a retreat in the MBI tradition, in the sense that this latter values the aspect of co-creation (between leaders and participants) of the field of mindfulness (McCown, 2013). It felt to me that the retreat was more led than held, and that my practice was led and extensively informed by the talks, rather than co-facilitated.

A lot of my inner process, especially during the first half of the retreat was related to my struggle with its different character. First, it took a while and quite a lot of inner information processing to orient myself to the way things were done. Then, I noticed real attachment to what I had experienced in my previous retreats, and to the persons of the retreat leaders of Retreats 2 and 3 in particular. I noticed that I was doing a lot of comparing and formed a lot of judgments. I observed how ill-disposed I was towards this different style of leading a retreat, often feeling irritation or even anger. I felt unsettled and out of tune with the retreat, sometimes blaming myself for this, other times blaming the retreat leaders and the structure. On the fourth day, I resolved to step out of the struggle, try to accept the retreat for what it was, and make the most of it. I formed the intention to open myself to what was being offered, rather than fixate on what I felt was lacking. From then on, I got my notebook out and joined the other participants in ample note-taking during the talks. I told myself that, after all, this retreat provided an excellent opportunity to review and complement my understanding of the Buddhist principles that are at the roots of the MBIs, which inform my teaching.

However, a later incident indented my resolve and reminded me of the paramount importance for me of a strong container. On the fifth day, a few individual slots for

interviews were offered and I took one. I put my name down next to a particular time and about 10 minutes earlier, I came to stand near the door to the interview room, to wait to be called in. As it turned out, the teacher overran with the previous participant by about 20 minutes. By the time they had finished, it was lunchtime, and my slot got moved to the afternoon. Of course, the leader apologised for that. Yet, I felt anger and hurt, but above all a sense of the lack of a boundaried container which would have made me feel safe enough to venture into new areas of vulnerability. (I realise that I may be more in need of strong containment than most because of my personal history and that the holding may have been entirely adequate for others.) This sense that the container was not solid enough came up again when, in the day preceding the end of the retreat, some participants started chatting during lunch, albeit in a whisper. The commitment to silence, which is also part of containment, had been broken, which is not something that I had experienced before.

Consolidation of insights from previous retreats

As in previous retreats, I noticed how difficult it was to step out of *doing mode*, and how I kept returning to it. I had come to the retreat with the intention of taking care of myself, with my bodily needs in mind especially. I tried to do some yoga practice during the breaks, get enough sleep, replenish my vitamin D levels by spending time in the sun, and so on. After a couple of days, I realised that I was holding this as a "project", which occupied a lot of mental space, and kept me engaged in *doing mode*. I noticed a constant leaning forward into the future, to the next break, the next meal, the next day. I tried to let go of all this as best I could.

I also observed my tendency to judge myself when my thoughts and emotions were not what I aspired to. I formed the intention to give myself kindness and warmth when I became aware of a thought/feeling/impulse that is part of a habitual reactive pattern, not just

notice it and disengage from it, but go back to the reactive content and give the part of me involved in it (usually a young aspect of me) some warmth, compassion and reassurance. This could take the form of an inner smile, a quick stroke of my hand, or a few words whispered silently – thus communicating to this part that it is not alone, disliked and disapproved of.

On the third day, I experienced a flare-up of HSV, which threw me into exhaustion. The usual waves of reactivity came up: anxiety about how I will cope, self-blame about my perceived failure to keep myself well, a sense of unfairness, aloneness, entrapment and feeling cut off from life. This was accompanied by exasperation about having to revisit all this yet again, which slowly made way for an acceptance that this was how it was. I wrote in my diary "life is here for me, as it is for the healthy one, the super-active one, the one who has it all; life is here even though it does not last. Life is here now, don't get in the way of it." On the fifth day, during sitting practice, I had a felt-sense experience which supported me in going through this phase of exhaustion. Again, this originated from the body's own inner wisdom. In a need for connection and support, I was drawn to bringing my focus of attention into my lower belly, feeling my presence in my pelvic area, and coming to explore around my perineum. I then got a sense of my vulva bearing down to meet the earth, as if it was wanting to draw energy from it. It felt natural and soothing. I could rest into the earth and be supported. I did not need to hold myself up by my sheer strength and produce energy out of nothing. I could rest into this support and draw sustenance from it. When, on feeling nerve pain into my left eye, later on, anxious thoughts came up about the HSV spreading to the eye, I went back to that anchoring in my lower belly to contain the panic.

After that experience, I noticed again the arising of a desire for healing and resolution, and the hope that I had discovered there the remedy to my health woes. I warned myself

against instrumentalising my process, valuing it only as a means to an end. I knew that this would only lead to disappointment, disillusion and the relinquishing of what had been of support, because it was not *the* healing I sought. I reminded myself that it is ok to leave this unresolved, and that all there was to do was to rest in the moment, this moment. On the sixth day, I noticed myself reminiscing about my childhood, adolescence, my early adult years. This came through waves of thoughts, memories arising, and night-time dreams. I developed a sense that I had been on this path of psycho-spiritual enquiry and healing for a long time. I saw my life in its continuity, whereas I ordinarily perceive it only as separate fragments. Yet, the sense of impermanence was very acute. I noticed a longing to return to childhood or adolescent years, when I had felt that my world was solid and that everything would always be the same. There was a lot of nostalgia and sadness at losses that the passing of time had engendered. Yet, thanks to the clarity, *decentering* (Safran & Segal, 1990), and compassionate embracing developed by my exploration on this and previous retreats, all this could now be held and contemplated within a spacious field of awareness.

I did not experience this retreat as offering the transformative cauldron that I had known before. Yet, just like the other retreats, this week provided a chance to practice extensively, develop more fluency with spotting reactivity, and working with it in a compassionate way. My practice had become stronger over the years. I had integrated the learnings from previous retreats, and developed my capacity to hold my process – and that of others when I teach – so I did not feel any ill-effects from this retreat's emphasis on dharma teaching rather than holding of the container. I bathed in Buddhist teachings for a week and experienced their connection with the MBIs I teach. Significantly, my experience of missing the containment and co-creation aspects of the MBIs, led me to appreciate how much I value

these characteristics, and how essential they are to enabling the opening of participants to new areas of vulnerability.

Discussion

Summary of results and main points

The results of this autoethnographic enquiry clearly confirm the important formative role played by the researcher's attendance of annual silent retreats in her development as a mindfulness teacher. The researcher found that retreats acted like a particle accelerator, bringing more energy and intensity into her process of engagement with mindfulness practice and hence to her capacity for embodiment. Since engagement with practice is the central factor in the learning of mindfulness – and deepening of one's relationship with it – the sheer number of practice hours that a retreat provides is already in itself a significant transformative factor. The fact that in a retreat setting these hours of practice are continuous – as opposed to shorter daily practice periods – gives rise to an experience of immersion into practice. This facilitates the seamless extension of formal practice into informal practice and reinforces the overall impact. Other aspects of the retreat format – such as the temporary suspension of daily demands and responsibilities, commitment to silence, the supportive holding of the retreat leaders and structures – together enabled this retreatant to deepen her mindfulness practice and develop a more intimate and trusting relationship with it.

Extensive practice allowed for the falling away of layer after layer of usual *doing mind* activity and promoted greater clarity and capacity to be present to experience without being completely identified with it (a process also known as *decentering* (Safran & Segal, 1990) or *reperceiving* (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, Freedman, 2006)). The present research elicited a growth in awareness of – and attunement to – moment-to-moment direct experience, under retreat circumstances. In parallel, the researcher experienced an intensification of

psychological and emotional reactivity, which a recent study on meditation-related challenges (Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen & Britton, 2017) also reported. This upwell in reactivity was at times challenging, yet as Kabat-Zinn (2003) highlighted, the meeting of challenge through practice – and in the researcher's experience, significantly, under the holding and guidance of skilful teachers – gives birth to a profound experience-based trust in practice. This intimate knowing of and confidence in practice is then communicated to MBI participants in the teaching process.

It is difficult to assess a teacher's quality of embodiment quantitatively, as it is more of a lived experience, both for the teacher him/herself and for the course participants. For this researcher, her growing into embodiment has felt first as a *settling into* and then as an *abiding in* mindfulness – with of course inevitable times of disconnection. This researcher has no doubt that the cumulative effect of her retreat experience has greatly contributed to the development of her capacity for embodiment and to her integration of mindful attitudes. As such, these experiences have nourished her capacity to teach from a place of deep connection with her practice. Looking at the research findings in more details, three main thematic aspects of the researcher's experience of retreats seem to be particularly significant in her development as a mindfulness teacher. These are the deepening of her connection with the body, the practice of *working with the difficult* and her experience of being held through her process by retreat leaders.

1. Deepening of the connection with the body

The researcher has found that her attendance of retreats enabled her to become more proficient in connecting with the body – which is one of the fundamental skills at the heart of the MBAs. In the course of her four retreats, she became familiarised with four different facets of body connection.

a. The body as a place of safety through grounding.

The researcher's anxiety that intensive practice might trigger a dissociation mechanism led her to spend a great amount of time in her first retreat developing her capacity to ground through the body. This provided her with a sense of stability and embodiment which brought her security and enabled her to open to more difficult aspects of her experience. Later on, whilst teaching, at times of heightened emotionality in the group, she was able to guide participants to contacting and experiencing their own grounding, from a place of intimately knowing its power to halt the spiral of reactivity and to engender steadiness. This skill also helped her to be present to – and contain – her own anxiety, when for example she started to teach, or when she met a new group, or again when she taught whilst feeling vulnerable through fatigue.

b. The body as a place from which to experience an enhanced sense of presence.

Through the long hours of formal and informal practice on retreat, the researcher became more attuned to her sensory experience, which enhanced her present-moment awareness. She also became less identified with mental activity and she experienced the joy of feeling as an embodied self. This quality of "physical connectedness and grounded-ness" (Crane et al., 2016, p. 25) in the teacher, contributes to the expression of their embodiment. It can be sensed by participants and fosters their own embodied experience through intersubjective resonance (McCown, Reibel and Micozzi, 2010). The authors highlight how such intra- and inter- subjective resonance can operate – through the neuroception and mirror neuron circuits – to reinforce the acquisition of mindfulness in a group context.

c. The body as a place where to meet and process emotional and psychological reactivity.

Taking the focus of awareness in the body to encounter reactivity through its physical manifestations, whilst bringing a compassionate quality of presence to it and exploring what is there, is key to working with reactivity (Segal et al, 2013). This was practiced extensively by the researcher throughout her retreat experiences and was facilitated by her state of connectedness with the body. This enabled her, as a teacher, to guide her MBP participants through this same process from her deep experienced-based knowledge of it. Other aspects of meeting difficult experience will be covered subsequently.

d. The body as a place in which to contact profound insights.

At very crucial times in her retreats – times of great vulnerability and retreating of the cognitive mind – the researcher experienced profoundly healing body-based insights. This happened for example through the metaphor offered by the poem "The Little Duck" (Babcock, 1947) or whilst connecting with body-based intuitive wisdom (feeling earth support through her vulva). Mindfulness practice, by allowing us to dis-engage from the chatter of the mind and by enhancing our connection with the body, opens us to a whole new body-based dimension of learning and healing. Experiencing this potential has deepened the researcher's trust in the practice. Her experience of body-based resonance with "The Little Duck" has given her great belief in the role of poems and metaphors in the transmission of mindfulness. It also provided a valuable insight into the potentials of learning through somatic resonance, both of which she tries to make full use of in her teaching.

2. Working with the difficult.

The capacity to meet challenging experiences through the body with open compassionate awareness lies at the heart of the MBI approach. The applications of this practice to various

forms of personal distress, such as chronic pain and anxiety, and to different types of stress, are described at great length by Kabat-Zinn in his seminal *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Furthermore, the approach is taught as a specific practice in Session 5 of the MBCT programme (Segal et al., 2013; Bartley, 2012). This practice of relating to difficult experience by acknowledging the way it is and holding it within a kind spacious awareness engages the Approach subsystem (Chaskalson, 2014). By first addressing bodily manifestations of aversive reactions to difficulty, it de-activates the reactivity process and promotes a stance of acceptance and allowing. This fosters a capacity to trust the natural unfolding of experience rather than try to interfere with it. As a trainee mindfulness teacher, the researcher was naturally familiar with the practice before her retreat experiences. However, both the intensification of her reactivity and the clear spacious quality of her awareness made for the particularly strong, hence formative, character of her experiences of engaging with distress. It is to be acknowledged that in some instances – when in particular she was unaware of her aversive reaction or because of her fear of engaging with traumatic material, the holding and guidance of the retreat leaders through this process was of great support. As such, this dimension will be further explored in the next section.

In order for the teacher to build trust in this practice and to guide participants through it whilst standing out of the way of the unfolding of the process, it is important for the instructor to have explored their own areas of vulnerability with it. The researcher's engagement with freshly-uncovered layers of vulnerability during these retreats has led her to realise that all parts of her experience, however distressing, could be engaged with mindfully. This has enabled her in turn to offer this confidence in practice to others, alongside her understanding of the necessary precautions and adjustments that need to be deployed in the case of engaging with traumatic material or other pathologies. This also helped her to remain

present to difficult inner experiences (anxiety, self-critical thoughts, doubt, not knowing) in a steady manner whilst teaching and to explore them afterwards on her own and in supervision. Nothing needs to be pushed away, it can all be acknowledged and engaged with.

3. **Holding of the retreat environment – Container, group, individual interviews, co-creation of the space of mindfulness**

The researcher found that, just like course participants in the MBI class setting, as a retreatant, she needed holding by retreat leaders in order to feel safe enough to engage with the difficult aspects of experience which inevitably come up on retreats. Bartley (2012) defines three stages in the development of a MBI group, which require the active involvement of the teacher: Forming the Circle, Holding the Circle and Moving out beyond the Circle. McCown et al. (2010) identify Stewardship of the Group as one of the essential skills of the MBI teacher. Aspects which seemed most significant in the researcher's retreat experience and had most formative impact were:

a. ***Forming of a container, by defining ground rules and boundaries.***

The crucial importance of this task for the retreat leaders became really clear for the retreatant when she missed the setting up of the container in her fourth retreat. She consequently felt "unheld" by the structure and unable to explore new challenging layers of experience.

b. ***Forming and Holding the Group.***

In the researcher's experience, even on a silent retreat, there can be a sense of the Group. And this sense was strongest and most supportive of individual work, when time had been spent at the beginning for the group to develop a sense of each other, through brief individual presentations both in pairs and in the larger group (Retreats 1, 2 and 3). This same process was also followed for the ending of the retreat. As reported in the Results section, some

retreats (2 and 3) incorporated daily whole group sharing-time (of approximately 45 minutes), in a format which paralleled the enquiry process in an MBI class, so that retreatants who wished to, could voice their experience. This group time contributed to the researcher developing a sense of belonging and co-journeying with others. It facilitated connection with the dimension of *common humanity* which is so important to the MBIs (Crane, 2009). This experience of feeling supported in her individual exploration and heartened by the group environment very much confirmed for the researcher the importance of attending to this dimension in her own teaching. She was sensitive and alert to how this was managed by retreat leaders and drew a lot of inspiration from the fine handling of group dynamics and stages of development by some retreat leaders.

c. Individual interviews.

Individual interviews (especially in Retreats 2 and 3) felt very much like opportunities for being held and guided in a way not dissimilar to one-to-one enquiry. The researcher experienced the supportive and fortifying effect of the retreat leaders' relational skills (warmth, compassion, respect, quality of authenticity, humour when appropriate). The retreat leaders also held and offered back the MBI conceptual and interpretative framework, at times when the researcher had lost sight of it. When necessary they offered guidance on how to engage more skilfully with challenges. Most significantly just like in the intersubjective process in the dyad MBI teacher and participant (McCown et al., 2010), they provided embodiment of mindful attitudes which re-energised and nourished the researcher's own capacity of embodiment of these attitudes. For the developing teacher part of the retreatant, these interviews served as an in vivo experiential masterclass of the subtle and complex relational dimension of MBI transmission.

d. Co-creation of the space of mindfulness.

A sense of mutuality between teacher and participants is an important dimension of MBI pedagogy. Crane describes it as a "feeling of co-journeying" (2009, p.151). The generation of mutuality – the sense that the exploration of mindfulness is a collaborative process – is part of a teacher's relational skills (Crane et al, 2016). The researcher found that she benefited more in her development as a mindfulness teacher from MBI-style retreats – non-hierarchical, with participation of retreat leaders in all activities alongside retreatants, with daily interviews providing relational contact and guidance very much in the style of enquiry in MBI teaching – than from Buddhist-style retreats where these ingredients differ. In her experience, an MBI retreat setting promotes intersubjective resonance between leaders and participants, as well as amongst participants themselves, through the sense of the group co-journeying. This fosters a sense of universality of experience, which she experienced as greatly supportive.

Furthermore, the researcher found that through their mirroring of some of the conditions of MBI classes, MBI-style retreats were richer in learnings for her as a developing mindfulness teacher. McCown (2013) points to the relational dimension of the MBI setting and highlights the fact that teachers practice – and model – turning towards and being with moment by moment, not in isolation but "within the confluence of the gathering" (p. 207). Therefore, the more a teacher has experienced the subtle complexities of this relational context, the more able (s)he will be to remain connected with practice within the complex interactive dynamics of the group setting. A recent paper by Griffith, Bartley and Crane (2019) confirms the importance for mindfulness teachers to develop understanding of the group dimension of MBI teaching and to grow proficiency in navigating its needs and potentials.

To sum up, this research has found that all the elements listed above have contributed to the development of the researcher's capacity for embodiment of the practice. Retreats have been a powerful incubator for her as a mindfulness teacher. Immersion in practice, resting into practice through the various challenges that came up, being in the authentic presence of experienced teachers, being held and guided by them, experiencing their quality of embodiment – in the manner they responded to whatever arose – through interviews, talks, the group open-time; all of these nourished the researcher's connection with practice and her integration of mindful attitudes. Furthermore, in these retreats where the sense of the group was cultivated, it made for a richer human experience and a sense of co-journeying together which supported her in opening to challenging experiences.

As noted in the Introduction, there has been to this date no research published on the topic of how retreat attendance contributes to trainee teachers' development. The present study aims to start addressing this deficit. Its findings fully endorse the UK Network for Mindfulness-Based Teacher Training Organisations' requirement for teachers (whether in training or not) to attend yearly teacher-led silent retreats, also stipulated by the Center for Mindfulness in the US. These results also support the view expressed by Crane et al., (2010) and Kabat-Zinn (2011) that retreat attendance by trainee teachers contributes to the deepening of their understanding of mindfulness practice and their intimacy with it. Furthermore, the researcher's own experience is broadly consistent with the findings of Khoury et al., (2019), and Zanesco et al., (2013) on the psychological and cognitive benefits of meditation retreat attendance, noting the more specific focus of the present research. Finally, these results are in alignment with recommendations by Cullen (2011) and McCown (2013) for mindfulness teachers (whether in training or not) to attend MBI-style retreats in preference to those in the Buddhist tradition.

Strengths and Limitations

As noted, this topic has not been the subject of published research until now, so this study covers new ground in providing research-based support for the retreat attendance requirements that are central to the development of mindfulness teachers. As an autoethnography, it offers a unique and detailed reflective insider account of the phenomenon investigated. Yet, inevitably, it also possesses the limitations of an autoethnography, namely its very narrow participant sample and its entirely subjective perspective. The researcher endeavoured to be as comprehensive, honest and thorough as she could in her data collection and analysis. However, she had to omit a few aspects of her experience in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of retreat leaders and of other retreat participants. Naturally, because of the researcher's dual status as researcher and participant, her subjectivity, shaped by her personality and life experience, as well as her unconscious blind spots, prejudices and biases, are all integral to the findings.

Implications

a. For mindfulness teachers, teacher training organisations and meditation retreats providers.

As noted above, this study greatly supports the existing requirements for attendance of retreats by trainee mindfulness teachers throughout their formative years. Additionally, it recommends that mindfulness teachers in training opt for MBI-style retreats, whenever possible, rather than those in the Buddhist tradition, so that in their development as mindfulness teachers, they may experience the full benefits of the commonality of aspects between MBI retreats and class settings. The researcher would also encourage retreat providers to continue to offer a wide selection of MBI-style retreats to suit the needs of trainee mindfulness teachers.

b. For future research

The researcher recommends for further research to be carried out with a wider sample of participants and with a particular interest in identifying specific benefits that attendance of retreats brings to trainee mindfulness teachers. A comprehensive study differentiating between MBI-style and traditional Buddhist retreats could also verify the conclusions reached by the present research.

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