

# Integrating the Three Characteristics with Mindfulness: A practical approach to deepening and holding the practice

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July, 2015

*If people can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love  
comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.*

Nelson Mandela

## Introduction

In life, we have a paradox to be resolved: *Given that I am bound by unhelpful habits, developed over a lifetime, what can I do to let go of them and develop a set of helpful habits, leading to greater contentment and peace?*

For many, (Secular) Mindfulness has provided at least a partial answer to this – offering a means for everyone, whatever their background, to find a place of stillness and to act with greater choice. This paper provides a new way of looking at this phenomenon, by making use of the Buddhist concept of the Three Characteristics (or Marks) of Existence.

I developed this approach over a period of three years. I started with the reality that I had dug myself into a hole – of frustration and seeming inability to do much to deal with the difficulties of life, given that I only had the tools that I had been using to dig myself into this hole. During this time, I was driven by my own need, and that of the participants in my mindfulness classes, to find a practical approach to a daunting but hopeful problem: **how can we work with life, as it expresses itself in everyday experiences, to let go of our well-established negative habits and cultivate new habits that would bring us greater happiness and contentment?**

The method outlined below presents a series of stages to achieve this. The sequence, developed in the sections of this paper, is:

- a. The dual exercise of *Allowing and Opening* – investigating whether I can accept past and present experience just as they are – and whether I can open to the positive experiences essential to this acceptance
- b. Expanding *Allowing and Opening* to each of the Three Characteristics (Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness and Selflessness/Not-self) to form Six Cultivations essential to a mindful way of being
- c. How these Six Cultivations map onto the Components of Modes of Mind described in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), and thus onto the structure of an Eight-Week Mindfulness Programme
- d. The usefulness of this approach and potential applications.

## Allowing and Opening<sup>2</sup>

Cultivation is at the core of this approach, and this requires that we can practice not just in meditation but in all of our everyday experiences in daily life. This is a real practice for the everyday, for experiences we might label as unpleasant or negative, as well as for positive experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> For many examples of practices for Allowing and Opening, I recommend two recent books– Tara Brach's *True Refuge*, and Rick Hanson's *Hardwiring Happiness*.

We do this by dividing practice into two types: *Allowing* and *Opening*. *Allowing* – also known as “letting be” or “welcoming” in some forms of meditation practice - is the active examination of our experience, moment by moment, with the focus on whether (*or not*) we can fully accept that moment of experience. Again, the practice works just as well and as productively by awareness of when we are unable to accept an experience, as it is when we are able to do so.

*Opening* – also known as “being with” – complements *Allowing* by focusing on the nurturing /privileging of certain aspects of experience. We open to aspects of our experience that we might not notice, such as kindness, generosity, gratitude, the richness of the present moment, or our inherent (and therefore rarely noticed) knowledge and capabilities. Awareness of such aspects leads in itself to an enhanced sense of well-being, but equally importantly, it provides a foundation for the *Allowing* practice which complements it. *Opening* practice can also work with negative aspects of experience, through investigation.

We can illustrate *Allowing* and *Opening* with an example. Most of us would recognise the experience of losing one’s job involuntarily as extremely unpleasant. How can we work with this effectively?

Suppose we start with *Allowing* ? We can ask the question “Can I accept that I’ve just been made redundant”. Initially, this would naturally be very difficult, so we can then move to an *Opening* practice. “Can I open to the experience, in the present moment?” Again, this may feel very unpleasant initially, but one can move deeper into the present moment – for example into detailed awareness of the body, as we commonly do in mindfulness practice. One may open to previously neglected skills and experience. After being in touch with – *Opening* to – these positive experiences, one can then go back to *Allowing*. After some time, the rejection of experience will lessen, and one may reach the point where they are able to accept the experience of redundancy. This experience of acceptance enables the mindfulness practitioner to reach a state of increased creativity, and greater openness to new experience and possibilities.

## The Six Cultivations

As shown in the previous section, we can work with experience in two complementary ways: *Allowing* and *Opening*. This provides a basis both for examining unhelpful patterns of thought, as well as for cultivating the reverse – helpful patterns.

In Buddhist psychology and practice, we can also view all of our experience in three frames of reference: these are the Three Characteristics of Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness and Selflessness (Not-self). We can then combine this with the previous view, so that each of the Three Characteristics is seen through the two viewpoints of *Allowing* and *Opening*. This results in six factors, and we call these the **Six Cultivations**.

Each of the six is a cultivation of helpful qualities and mental states. This produces a quality of mind that is pleasant and resilient, and can even lead to a state of great contentment, where one is able to make meaning of their experience, whatever the vicissitudes of life.

The Six Cultivations – with their corresponding Characteristic - are<sup>3</sup>:

Cultivation	Characteristic
Non-striving / Attunement	Impermanence
Presence	
Approaching	Unsatisfactoriness
Kindness and Gratitude	
Non-identification	Selflessness
Agency and Poise	

<sup>3</sup> Note that just as we have the “positive” cultivations shown here, we equally have a parallel set of six “negative” cultivations. These are the inevitable results of our habits, and which keep us “stuck” on unhelpful behaviours and mental states. Also note that the Six Cultivations are an *application* of the Three Characteristics and not part of Buddhist doctrine.

We can illustrate the Six Cultivations with an example. Suppose I am worried about an occasional pain – say in my shoulder. It is bearable, and most of the time, I manage to function with this problem. However, I spend a great deal of time *worrying* about it – in my head, I have a recurrent voice that wonders “could it be arthritis, or a symptom of something worse, even cancer?” (Identification with Thoughts). I may also yearn for my younger days, when I never seemed to have such pains (Striving towards a ‘better’ time). I may find diversions – drinking too much alcohol, or watching too much television – to avoid these difficult thoughts (**not** approaching difficulties).

These thoughts and reactions are perfectly ordinary, and yet they, and all the other worries and anxieties we take with us through life, create a great deal of suffering. By recognising thoughts as what they are – just thoughts – we can lead a happier life, dealing with the problems that need to be resolved, or letting go of the thoughts that are merely worries and not actual problems. We do this through practicing (some of) the Six Cultivations shown above – in this case, (1) recognising that the thoughts and worries are not actually facts, just mental events (Non-identification), (2) paying attention to the everyday events of my life and how much satisfaction they bring (Presence), and (3) recognising the unpleasantness of this experience, but with kindness and compassion towards myself (Kindness and Gratitude).

## How this fits into a Mindfulness Framework and Course Structure

Through investigation<sup>4</sup> we can become familiar with our unskilful habits of mind and action. Then, with time and with practice, we can **change** them to skilful ones. Fortunately, we do not need to do this from scratch, as the Six Cultivations shown above map well onto the components of Modes of Mind already expressed in MBCT and other mindfulness approaches. Let’s look at an example.

A typical session of a mindfulness course (Session 6 in MBCT) will cover “thoughts are not facts” – how we tend to identify with our thoughts (and worries and obsessions), and then think of them as if they are actual facts rather than just mental events. In terms of Modes of Mind, the relevant component is:

Seeing thoughts as solid and real versus treating them as mental events

This corresponds to one of the Six Cultivations, namely *Non-identification*, which is the “Allowing” aspect of Selflessness – allowing ourselves to just let the thought **be**. Seen from this viewpoint, we are freed from the habitual need to obsess and worry, and thus more able to immerse ourselves fully in the present moment and to notice the full richness of whatever arises.

Finally, we note that many Eight-Week mindfulness course curricula, and MBCT in particular, are based on the seven Modes of Mind Components. The following table<sup>5</sup> shows the correspondence between them, as well as with the Six Cultivations:

Session	Theme	Mode of Mind Component	Cultivation	Allowing/Opening
1	Awareness and Automatic Pilot	Automatic pilot versus conscious choice	N/A <sup>6</sup>	
2	Living in Our Heads	Analysing versus sensing	Agency and Poise	Opening
3	Gathering the Scattered Mind	Mental time travel versus remaining in the present moment	Presence	Opening

<sup>4</sup> See the RAIN process in Tara Brach, *True Refuge* (2013), pp. 65ff

<sup>5</sup> Books based on the MBCT approach to mindfulness tend to use different wordings for the same components of Modes of Mind. The wordings used in this paper are from Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness: a Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World* (2011). However, the order and themes for the MBCT sessions are taken from the standard reference work for MBCT, Segal, Williams and Teasdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (2013).

<sup>6</sup> There is no corresponding Cultivation for this Mode of Mind component, as it serves as an Introduction to the Course and provides an initial practice in concentration. This will be a basis for all the sessions that follow in the course.

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Session	Theme	Mode of Mind Component	Cultivation	Allowing/Opening
4	Recognising Aversion	Avoidance versus approaching	Approaching	Allowing
5	Allowing/ Letting Be	Striving versus accepting	Non-striving / Attunement	Allowing
6	Thoughts Are Not Facts	Seeing thoughts as solid and real versus treating them as mental events	Non-identification	Allowing
7	How Can I Best Take Care of Myself?	Depleting versus nourishing activities	Kindness and Gratitude	Opening
8	Maintaining and Extending New Learning	N/A	N/A	

## Conclusion and Potential Applications

The previous sections show how we can develop the Six Cultivations – a combination of the Three Characteristics and the duality of Allowing and Opening. We also saw that these Six map onto the components of the Modes of Mind model in MBCT, and onto a typical mindfulness course structure. What are some potential applications of this approach?

**Everyday life** First and foremost, this is an approach for everyday life. The Six Cultivations can be practiced in ordinary situations, as well as in formal meditation. The use of this approach in everyday situations is particularly powerful, as it provides a constant and never-ending stream of experiences with which to practice, and immediate feedback both on the investigation of experience, as well as through the effects of these cultivations.

**Teaching a conventional eight-week course** This approach can assist the course leader/teacher in emphasizing certain aspects of participants' experience – particularly during Inquiry. It can also be valuable in helping participants to relate to the commonality of their experiences ("common humanity"). Here, the curriculum of an MBCT course – either a full-practice "standard" course or the somewhat condensed "Frantic World" course such as those taught at the Houses of Parliament - is unchanged; the only difference would be in how the leader/teacher works with participants and their experience.

**Specialist mindfulness courses** I have used this approach in teaching a variant of MBCT, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer (MBCT-Ca)<sup>7</sup>. The standard curriculum for this variant was used, but we made use of the Six Cultivations, especially as part of the Inquiry process. It had particular value in dealing with issues around identity and change – for example, difficulties in adjusting to bodily changes in a relatively short space of time, and then coping with the uncertainty and loss of a sense of control that often are part of cancer treatment.

**Graduate courses** A five-week course curriculum has been developed based on the Six Cultivations approach. It is designed for those who have done an eight-week or equivalent mindfulness course. This course focuses on going deeper into the framework of mindfulness with Modes of Mind and the Six cultivations, on further developing the skills learned during a mindfulness course, and on maintaining a mindfulness practice in everyday life.

**Lines of Research** There is significant research potential in using this approach. It provides additional structure to the factors of the Modes of Mind model, and can be used to test possible correlations between them. As it is an operationalized model, it also can provide a research basis for looking into the underlying mechanisms of mindfulness and the effectiveness of different approaches to learning and maintaining it. As this approach focuses on skill cultivation, one productive line of research would be to focus on the relationship between skills mastery and course outcomes.

<sup>7</sup> Trish Bartley, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer* (2012)