

**Turning towards difficult experience in Mindfulness Based
Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness Based Stress
Reduction (MBSR) teaching.**

Dh. Taravajra

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School of Psychology, Bangor University

Student number 500128296

ABSTRACT

This study suggests that learning the skill of ‘turning towards’ difficulties is a key component for students on mindfulness-based courses such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). How teachers experience and convey the skill of approaching difficult experience with curiosity and acceptance is a relatively unexplored area. In this study, six experienced teachers were interviewed and the findings explored through a heuristic method. The results demonstrate approaches that help or hinder the process of conveying the skill of ‘turning towards’ difficulty. In particular, an invitational approach, the importance of kindness and the embodiment of mindfulness by the teacher were emphasised. Greater understanding of how experienced teachers embody and communicate this skill could inform the ways in which mindfulness-based courses are taught, thus making the approach more effective. This may, in turn, benefit those who seek therapeutic help from mindfulness-based approaches.

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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STATEMENT 1

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The clinical applications of mindfulness continue to be of great interest in the field of mental health, (Crane, Kuyken, Hastings, Rothwell, & Williams, 2010a; Hoffman, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010), and recently appear to have crossed over into popular culture. For example, in May 2010, the Daily Express (a popular English newspaper) had a two page article on mindfulness for depression with the eye-catching headline ‘Why Buddhists don’t get the blues’, (Daily Express, 2010).

In the United Kingdom, Mindfulness based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for depression has been given approval from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) since 2004 (NICE, 2009). The growing interest in MBCT is evidenced by a recent report from the Mental Health Foundation (2010) which has recommended that *“the expansion of MBCT training and services to meet the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommendation should be driven by the Department of Health’s Improving Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) programme”*, (p.10).

In this study, the mindfulness approaches that I will be focusing on are MBCT and MBSR (Mindfulness based Stress Reduction). MBSR was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues in America from the 1980s onwards to relieve chronic physical pain and is fully described in *Full Catastrophe Living*, (Kabat – Zinn, 1990). Building on this work, MBCT was created to reduce relapse into depression (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002). In her overview of mindfulness-based treatment approaches, Baer (2006) explains that *“MBCT is based largely on MBSR and uses many of its components.”* (p. 13).

Teaching people how to relate to difficult experience is a key aspect of MBCT and MBSR courses. How teachers experience and convey the skill of ‘turning towards’ difficulties is a relatively unexplored area. I have not, for example, found any research papers addressing this area directly. (A search for ‘mindfulness teaching turning towards difficulty’ at the Bangor University ISI Web of Knowledge on June 25th 2010 revealed no entries). The potential value of exploring this issue is that developing greater understanding of this area

could inform the ways in which mindfulness-based courses are taught, thus making the approach more effective. My hypothesis is that an exploration of how experienced teachers embody and communicate this skill will be of significance for other mindfulness based teachers (including myself) and those engaged in training teachers. This will, in turn, benefit those who attend MBCT/MBSR courses.

The key terms of this inquiry are those of ‘difficulty’ and ‘turning towards’. Difficulty covers a huge range of human experiences from an itchy nose in sitting meditation to the most severe trauma or loss imaginable. In this context, it’s whatever students bring to a class that, normally, they want to get rid of such as physical pain, depression or anxiety. Not getting what one wants or getting what one doesn’t want are aspects of difficult experience: painful thoughts, emotions or physical sensations can all create difficulty; pleasant experiences can also become difficult when we become attached to them, especially when they change and we don’t want them to.

Turning towards is a way of describing a basic orientation in relation to whatever is being experienced, including difficulty. In mindfulness teaching, other similar terms that are used include ‘embracing’, and less actively, ‘staying with’, ‘allowing’, ‘opening to’, and ‘being with’. Turning towards suggests approach rather than avoidance: being unwilling to ‘turn towards’ or ‘turning away from’ may be more familiar in the guise of avoidance, denial, suppression and distraction.

My methodology is a heuristic one with an emphasis on meaning derived from the lived experience of the subject that is being examined (Moustakas, 1990). The nature of heuristic inquiry is phenomenological and originates as a process of internal search, (Casterline, 2009). The heuristic method seemed an ideal way to explore mindfulness teaching as, (I hope to show), the embodied experiences of the teacher are central to the delivery of MBSR/MBCT. I have been studying mindfulness-based approaches at Bangor University since 2005 and teaching MBCT courses regularly since that time. Mindfulness is not easy to practise and the learning of it gives rise to many challenges for participants. In the course of my work, the question of how to help students manage difficult experience has become more pressing.

I have also been a practising Buddhist for nearly 30 years. During that time an ongoing reflection for me has been on what Buddhism calls dukkha (Pali), usually translated as suffering or unsatisfactoriness. It is a central question in Buddhism as Gethin (1998) explains: *“Literally ‘pain’ or ‘anguish’, in its religious and philosophical contexts, dukkha is, however, suggestive of an underlying sense of ‘unsatisfactoriness’ or ‘unease that must ultimately mar our experience of happiness.”* (p.61).

On a personal level, I have identified a recurring thought of not being good enough as a meditator and, more recently, as a teacher. Other mindfulness teachers I know have spoken about their ‘imposter syndrome’, an underlying feeling of not being sufficiently qualified to teach. Initially my plan was to write a heuristic study on ‘the experience of not being good enough’. This continues to engage my attention and in this thesis has expanded into turning towards difficulty more generally.

In relation to teaching mindfulness, the personal embodiment of the teacher is often highlighted as crucial. For example, Crane (2009) writes that *“[t]he key distinguishing skill, which is essential for successfully conveying the essence of an MBCT course, is that of being able to teach through an embodiment of the qualities of mindfulness.”* (p.155).

Since it is clear that opening to all my experiences with warmth and curiosity is the essence of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), how I respond to difficulties is a key aspect of embodiment. It is easier to remain open to pleasant experience such as ice cream and sunshine but what about loss, pain and the inevitable frustrations of daily life? If turning towards difficulty is a crucial part of the whole mindfulness approach and teachers are meeting groups of people with a natural human resistance to acknowledging or turning towards the difficult, it would be useful to see how that junction is negotiated. And also useful to uncover the cumulative wisdom about how to help people to do this. I imagined that if this subject was of interest to me, it is probably of interest to other teachers.

This combination of personal and professional issues has drawn me into exploring this subject through conversations with other experienced teachers and my own heuristic process. My intention was to deepen my understanding of this central question: how do human beings address the inevitable ‘unsatisfactoriness’ that is part and parcel of being

alive in a way that reduces rather than increases suffering. This will then inform how I and others teach mindfulness to other people who face their own challenges, their own ‘Full Catastrophe Living’.

The rest of this thesis can be outlined as follows:

In Chapter 2, I will summarise the findings on my themes from the ever expanding pedagogical literature on mindfulness, along with research from related areas such as pain management using acceptance, and approach and avoidance.

In Chapter 3, I will describe the methodology I have used to investigate my research questions.

In Chapter 4, I will present the results of my interviews with six mindfulness teachers.

Chapter 5 will be a ‘creative synthesis’: the culmination of the heuristic process that I have used.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I will discuss the results and draw some conclusions. I will also suggest further questions that could be usefully pursued.

Chapter 2 Literature review

A Cedary Fragrance

*Even now,
decades after,
I wash my face with cold water --
Not for discipline,
nor memory,
nor the icy, awakening slap,
but to practice
choosing
to make the unwanted wanted.*

Jane Hirshfield, (2002, p.32).

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the texts and research papers in relation to four key areas which relate to my theme of turning towards difficulty. These can be outlined as follows:

1. The general background to mindfulness based approaches.
2. Is turning towards difficulty central to MBSR/MBCT?
3. Why is turning towards *unpleasant* experience emphasised?
4. Approach, avoidance and mindfulness.

1. The general background to mindfulness based approaches

Of the formulated mindfulness programmes, I will be focusing on MBSR and MBCT which I have studied and taught since 2005. For reasons of focus and time, I will not be examining other interventions which make use of mindfulness such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) or Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) (Linehan, 1993).

In the last 30 years, (at least from the publication of *Full Catastrophe Living*, Kabat –Zinn, 1990), there has been a fertile encounter between Western scientific psychology and the contemplative traditions which arose in Asia, primarily Buddhism. Mindfulness based approaches have arisen from this encounter. They are usually taught in eight week programmes and it is now widely accepted that they can bring therapeutic benefits and improvements in well-being, (Baer 2003, 2009; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004).

How then to describe what mindfulness is? Practitioners have made attempts to capture something of the flavour or taste of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (1994) gives his operational definition: “*paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgementally*”, (p. 4). Germer (2005) suggests that mindfulness is a skill and “*a way of relating to all experience – positive, negative and neutral- such that our overall level of suffering is reduced and our sense of wellbeing increases.*” (p. 4). Mindful attention is also seen as relating to things as they are in any given moment to counter the danger of ruminative thinking which can lead to low moods such as depression (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007). In particular, “[i]t (mindfulness) is a stance by which ***we intentionally welcome and turn toward whatever arises- including inner experiences that we’d normally fight or try to escape***” (my emphasis), (Williams et al., 2007, p. 67).

Western scientific researchers have not found it straightforward to conceptualise or measure mindfulness. Davidson (2010) suggests that mindfulness can refer to a state, a trait and an independent variable that can be manipulated in an experiment. He calls for more studies to clarify how mindfulness is measured and how, as an approach, it can be compared with other interventions. Several mindfulness measures have been created as part of this process of testing the effect of mindfulness practice such as the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI), (Buchheld, Grossman, & Walach, 2001), the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), (Brown and Ryan, 2003), the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (KIMS), (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004) and the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS), (Lau et al., 2006).

Kuyken et al., (2008) consider the possible ways that mindfulness training is effective. The variables include stepping out of automatic modes of reacting, behavioral and cognitive elements of MBCT, as well as nonspecific effects of attention and group support. They conclude that “[r]esearch explicitly focused on studying mechanisms of change is needed to examine these outstanding questions” (p. 976). A study by Farb et al., (2010), found that mindfulness training assists recovery from emotional challenge and increased tolerance of negative affect “and yet little is known about its mechanisms of action” (p. 25).

2. Is turning towards difficulty central to MBSR/MBCT teaching?

In this section I will explore how ‘turning towards’ difficult experience is specifically conceptualised in MBSR/MBCT teaching. The emphasis of ‘turning towards’ or ‘being with’ difficulty, of ‘working with’, ‘putting out a red carpet’ or a ‘welcome mat’, and ‘accepting’ is contrasted with ‘avoiding’, ‘turning away’, ‘retreating from’, ‘escaping’ and is found repeatedly throughout the pedagogic mindfulness literature. At the same time, there is little published material on the lived experience of doing this, especially from the teacher’s perspective. For my sources I will primarily draw on the main texts written by mindfulness teachers rather than on research papers which have not yet explored this area in any depth apart from some studies into mindfulness and physical pain (for example, McCracken & Vellamen, 2010; McCracken and Zhao-O’Brien, 2010).

MBSR teaching

“Some people have difficulty understanding why we emphasize that they try and enter into their pain when they simply hate it and just want it to go away”, (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 291).

Ever since Jon Kabat-Zinn began teaching MBSR in Massachusetts, mindfulness has been utilised to help people manage physical pain, especially chronic pain. *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) is a full description of the MBSR programme. How does mindfulness help people to manage pain? McCracken & Zhao-O’Brien, (2010), concluded that *“when people with chronic pain allow themselves to experience at least some of the unwanted psychological experiences that occur in their life and do not attempt to control these, they are more likely to function better and suffer less.”* (p. 175).

McCracken & Thompson, (2009), highlight the positive impact of components of mindfulness from the MAAS scale (Brown and Ryan, 2003) (Acting with Awareness and Present Focus, in particular,) on pain, pain-related distress, disability, depression, pain-related anxiety, medication use, and physician visits related to pain. Williams (2010) comments on a study (Grant, Courtemanche, Duerden, Duncan, & Rainville, 2010), exploring the impact of long term meditation on pain where long term meditators were found to have greater pain tolerance and also thicker gray matter in brain regions relevant to pain processing:

“This suggests that one problem in chronic pain is not only the pain itself, but the “turning away” from, the averting of attention from the regions that give rise to painful sensations, either through deliberate distraction, or by thinking about the pain (conceptually) rather than experiencing the sensations directly.” (pp. 4 - 5).

MBCT teaching

MBCT is based on MBSR and was applied initially to reducing relapse into depression (Segal et al., 2002). Crane (2009) describes how in the MBCT course, *“[i]nvestigating the possibility of reversing the instinctive trend to retreat from difficulty and to actually lay out a red carpet for our unwanted feelings is a core theme of the MBCT programme, especially in the second half” (p. 53).*

The creators of MBCT describe how to work with difficult aspects of experience:

“In a way, she had found a way of “turning towards” rather than escaping or avoiding her experience. This is exactly what we ask of each participant: to hold the difficult aspects of their daily lives, as well as their beliefs and expectations about them, and to move closer to them. After all, this is what they have been doing in the practice for the past 6 weeks with bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts.”(Segal et al., 2002, p. 278).

In the Mindfulness-Based Interventions Teacher Rating Scale (MBI-TRS) version 7 (Crane, Soulsby, Kuyken, Eames & Williams, 2010b), *“a central theme of mindfulness based interventions is learning to be with and work with the difficult.” (p.2).*

In MBCT teaching, week 5 of the 8 week course is explicitly devoted to ‘working with difficulty’ and the exploration of *“a radically different relationship to unwanted experience – that of acceptance, allowing and letting be.” (Segal et al., 2002, p. 219).* The session

includes a meditation where students are invited deliberately to bring to mind a difficult issue. Baer (2006) comments that

“[t]he purpose of the exercise is to practice counteracting the usual tendency to avoid difficult or painful feelings. The consequences of adopting this approach often include the realisation that it is possible to name the difficulty, face it and work with it, and that avoidance is not necessary and may be maladaptive ... As deliberately approaching problems that we usually try to avoid can be difficult, support from experienced group leaders is important” (p.15)

In mindfulness classes, another common way of illustrating this approach to difficult experience is the use of the Guest House poem by Rumi, (Barks, 1997, Appendix I). Santorelli comments *“[t]he poem may be suggesting an inner attitude towards whatever we encounter, urging us to consider the possibility of meeting our grief and pain openhandedly. This is not our usual way of meeting adversity”* (1999, p. 151).

For the purposes of this study, ‘difficulty’ includes any kind of physical, emotional or mental distress.

A Rationale

What is the rationale in MBSR or MBCT classes for this approach to ‘the unwanted’ whether sensations, feelings or thoughts?

In MBSR, meditation practice is seen as a *“laboratory for exploring pain”*, (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 308), where participants learn how to come to terms with pain. This is contrasted with distraction which may be helpful some of the time but mindfulness offers the possibility of new levels of understanding, which is not available from distraction or escape. The goal of opening to troubling thoughts is freedom rather than happiness, *“because you know they are just bubbles in the stream of thought and not the reality.”* (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 5).

In MBCT, a clear link is made between the avoidance of difficult emotions due to aversion which can, *“lead to the reinstatement of old, automatic, habitual, relapse-related patterns of mind.”* (Segal et al., 2002, p. 223). Teasdale, Segal & Williams, (2003), suggest that mindfulness encourages acceptance towards difficult and unpleasant experiences so that self-induced aversion does not increase the negative impact of those difficult experiences.

Freedom is also explicitly suggested in MBCT as a goal rather than relaxation or happiness, “*freedom from the tendency to get drawn into automatic reactions to pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, feelings and events.*” (Segal et al., 2002, p. 193).

3. Why is turning towards *unpleasant* experience emphasised?

Mindfulness may appear to be focused on difficulty rather than more positive human experiences such as joy or beauty. It would be easy to get this impression from some of the literature, perhaps more so in MBCT with its emphasis on the ruminative patterns leading to depressive relapse. For example, “*through the cultivation of mindfulness, each of us will discover our own ways to transform our relationship with what we find unpleasant, difficult and threatening.*” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 141).

This perspective that mindfulness focuses on difficulty is reminiscent of the accusation often leveled at Buddhism (the main tradition from which mindfulness comes): that it is pessimistic and mainly concerned with the suffering in life. For example, in his novel the Schopenhauer Cure, Yalom places one of his characters on a Buddhist vipassana retreat in India, “[e]verywhere she looked, there was renunciation, sacrifice, limitation, and resignation. Whatever happened to life? To joy, expansion, passion, carpe diem?” (Yalom, 2006, p.153).

In principle, mindfulness is a willingness to be open to all aspects of one’s experience, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral (to use the traditional Buddhist classification which has been adopted within modern mindfulness contexts). According to Baer (2006), “*Kabat-Zinn (2003) notes that mindful attention includes a stance of compassion, interest and friendliness and open-heartedness toward the experience observed in the present moment, regardless of how pleasant or aversive it may be*” (p.3, my emphasis).

If we are open to all experiences, this can include awareness of beauty, wonder, awe and the interconnectedness of life. As Kabat Zinn, (1990) has noted “*The ability to perceive interconnectedness and wholeness in addition to separateness and fragmentation can be*

cultivated through mindfulness practice.”(p. 157). Cattron, (2009) concluded that there is a connection between mindfulness and a sense of beauty as “[m]indful people are more aware of their immediate surroundings, and thus are more likely to notice beauty in nature, to notice beauty in human artifacts, and to notice beauty in human behavior” (p.11). In a study of mindful care at a hospice, Bruce & Davies, (2005) found a link between mindfulness and noticing the beauty of life: “[p]reparing elegant, simple meals; having bright, clean rooms, fresh flowers, and incense; paying attention to the vital, immaterial space” (p.1337).

A question that arises here is: does ‘difficulty’ always mean **unpleasant** experiences or can it include pleasant or neutral aspects of life?

Both MBSR and MBCT make use of a pleasant events calendar as well as an unpleasant events calendar. These are designed to help participants become more aware of the pivotal importance of these early (often unconscious) reactions to events which are either pleasant or unpleasant. At this point, attachment (holding on to actual or desired experience) and aversion (pushing away unwanted experience) are both viewed as forms of automatic reacting. “Notice how a pleasant experience has become something to which this person is strongly attached. And the attachment is beginning to produce frustration.” (Segal et al., 2002, p. 199). This is also extended to neutral or trivial thoughts and impulses. Also both attachment and aversion involve wanting things to be different from how they are right now. This automatically triggers some form of negative feeling (Segal et al., 2002, p. 70).

The dangers from aversive automatic reacting to unpleasant experiences, however, receive more attention, “[a] core theme of this programme is that the best way to prevent relapse is to act on the basis of staying present with what is unpleasant in our experience.” (Segal et al., 2002, p.190). Perhaps people suffering from depression notice more unpleasant moments? Western psychology has been criticised for its emphasis on mental dysfunction, (Boniwell, 2008) and modern mindfulness approaches have emerged in this context.

Aversion is clearly linked with depression in the research that led to the development of MBCT (Segal et al., 2002). Negative thinking is, after all, a cornerstone of the cognitive

approach to depression (Burns, 1980). At the same time, Gilbert (2009) shows that the picture here is complex, *“The importance of learning tolerance for painful feelings is fairly clear. However, it’s perhaps surprising to discover that some people also need to learn to tolerate and savour positive emotions.”* (p. 201).

Finally, this greater emphasis on difficult, painful or unwanted experience in mindfulness training may also be because, for evolutionary reasons, our brains are more aware of unpleasant experiences than positive ones. Avoiding the tiger is more urgent than missing out on some food or even a possible mate, as *“your brain is built more for avoiding than for approaching. That’s because it’s the negative experiences, not the positive ones, that have generally had the most impact on survival”* (Hanson, 2009, p. 40).

4. Approach, avoidance and mindfulness

There is a vast body of research on approach/avoidance and its relationship with personality and behaviour (Elliot & Covington, 2001; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Heimpel, 2006; Higgins, 1997; Roth & Cohen, 1986) and emotional satisfaction (Updegraff, Gable & Taylor, 2004). *“Approach and avoidance are simply metaphors for cognitive and emotional activity that is oriented either toward or away from threat.”* (Roth & Cohen, 1986, p. 813). Hayes & Feldman (2004) review the evidence that *“avoidance and overengagement with emotions are associated with worse psychological and health outcomes.”* (p. 255).

It seems that the evolutionary background to avoidance has led in human beings to complex avoidance patterns. Williams et al., (2007) suggest that *“approach and avoidance mechanisms are fundamental to all living systems and to the survival of the organism. Approach and avoidance circuitry is wired into specific areas of the brain.”* (p. 67). Germer (2005) puts the tendency to avoid unpleasant experience in a wider context of western culture, claiming that *“[t]he torrent of messages we receive from advertisements leads most people to feel that if only they purchase the right remedy, they would never experience pain ...”* (p. 189). He also notes *“that behaviourism, psychodynamic psychotherapy and insight meditation all agree that much human suffering results from the counterproductive habit of avoiding painful situations,”* (pp. 45 - 46).

Mindfulness teachers have made use of the approach/avoidance model to describe the process of mindfulness. For example, Williams (2008) contrasts the discrepancy-based ('doing') mode of mind, and its alternative ('being') mode, "*Avoidance versus Approach. Doing mode causes particular problems when it is motivated by avoidance of subjective experience. Mindfulness encourages remaining open, 'turning towards' the difficult and the unpleasant.*" (p.729).

Avoidance has been linked to rumination, aversion and depressive relapse. In MBCT terms, "*When we react to our own negative thoughts and feelings with aversion, the brain circuitry involved in physical avoidance, submission or defensive attack (the avoidance system of the brain) is activated.*" (Williams et al., 2007, p. 35). In contrast, "*Mindfulness embodies approach: interest, openness, curiosity (from the Latin curare "to care for"), goodwill and compassion*" (p. 67).

Studies suggest a close association between higher levels of mindfulness, either as a trait or as cultivated during treatment, and lower levels of rumination, avoidance, perfectionism and maladaptive self-guides, (Williams, 2008). In a multi-method examination of the effects of mindfulness on stress attribution, coping, and emotional well-being, mindful individuals "*reported less frequent use of avoidant coping strategies and in two studies, reported higher use of approach coping.*" (Weinstein, Brown & Ryan, 2009, p. 374).

Many writers about psychotherapy, (a related discipline to mindfulness training) have commented on the perils of avoidance and the benefits of approach, acceptance or turning towards,

"The depressed patient, regardless of the form of the depression, is turning away from his or her experience. "Turning-away" is a less technical expression than "experiential avoidance"... In therapy we offer an invitation to turn toward and be with the experience at hand."(Germer, 2005, p. 133).

Gilbert (2009) backs this up this view that avoidance of painful feelings creates more difficulty and that acceptance of emotions is a key aim of therapy. He continues,

“[r]esearch shows that the more we try to suppress or get rid of certain feelings, thoughts or memories, the more they come back as unwanted intrusions into our minds or dreams. Rather, it is more useful to go into these painful areas of our minds with openness, acceptance, curiosity and kindness.” (p.361)

Summary of Chapter 2

I have sought to explore the relevant literature on mindfulness in general, and turning towards difficulty in particular. Mindfulness teachers (Crane, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal et al., 2002) clearly place turning towards difficulty at the heart of MBSR/MBCT teaching and explain the rationale for this profoundly counterintuitive response. Apart from these pedagogic texts, there is a striking absence of research around this specific topic of the lived experience of turning towards difficulty in mindfulness teaching. This involves both teachers and students and this study focuses on the experiences of teachers. The research on pain management and acceptance and approach/avoidance is relevant and helpful to mindfulness teaching.

Chapter 3 Methodology and Method

“Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul.”(Carl Jung quoted in Crane, 2009, p 143).

Introduction

In this chapter I describe my research questions and the heuristic methodology that I have used to investigate them. Initially I consider the broader background to research methodologies for mindfulness teaching which has played an important part in the development of this study..

1. Research methodologies for mindfulness teaching.

Quantitative studies have revealed some of the inner mechanisms of mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention, (Baer, 2009; Davidson, 2010; Kuyken et al., 2008) and the current acceptance of MBCT for depression within the UK health system (National Institute of Clinical Excellence, (NICE), 2009) relies heavily on a clear evidential platform in relation to outcomes, (Coelho, Canter & Ernst, 2007; Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Williams, 2008). In a world of limited resources and, at times, unexamined assumptions in healthcare (Goldacre, 2009), such evidence is essential. At the same time, with others (Gordon, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Wallace, 2007), I place a high value on an exploration of aspects of human experiencing which are less amenable to scientific analysis and measurement. In a recent paper on mindfulness teacher training, Crane et al., (2010a) examine the coming together of two paradigms, medical/scientific and contemplative: *“There are tensions inherent in the process of applying a paradigm that emphasises measurement and outcome to a paradigm that has many dimensions that appear inherently unquantifiable.”* (p.76).

Firstly, I would like to look at the impact of the predominantly scientific paradigm in relation to mindfulness research. Then I will examine the ‘contemplative paradigm’.

The scientific method relies on establishing, where possible, the causal relationships between treatment and outcome. Clearly this is a vital aspect of decision making about treatment and drugs provision where resources are limited. Bowling (2002) suggests that “[q]uantitative techniques are appropriate if the issue is known about, relatively simple and unambiguous and amenable to valid and reliable measurement.” (p. 131).

This ‘evidence based’ medicine is exactly what is most valued within the United Kingdom National Health Service, (Haynes & Richardson, 1996; Rosenberg & Donald, 1995; Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray). Of course, the ‘evidence’ also needs to be interpreted and this can give rise to opposing viewpoints. For example, among the different therapy modalities, Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been prioritised within the NHS because of its apparently superior evidence base (Holmes, 2002, McPherson, Evans & Richardson, 2009, Department of Health guidelines, 2007). As discussed in Stiles, Barkham, Twigg, Mellor-Clark & Cooper, (2006) and Stiles, Barkham, Mellor-Clark & Connell, (2008), the ‘evidence’ is that theoretically different approaches (eg CBT, Person centred, Psychodynamic) tend to have equivalent outcomes. The view that Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) are the ‘gold standard’ of research has also been questioned (Black, 1996; Cartwright, 2009).

MBCT for depression for people who are currently well but have had three or more episodes of depression has been approved by the UK National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) since 2004, (NICE, 2009). It seems clear that the development of MBCT in the UK is directly connected to this ‘official’ approval based on the original RCTs (Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Teasdale et al., 2000; Williams, 2008).

So now I wish to look briefly at the contrasting, contemplative paradigm. An apparently subjective, contemplative tradition such as Buddhism has also been described (Wallace, 2007), as a radically empirical record of experience which can complement scientific empiricism:

“Buddhists meditatively refine and extend mental perception though the cultivation of mindfulness and introspection, primarily as a means of exploring and controlling

the mind. Scientists technologically refine and extend their physical senses as a means of exploring and controlling physical phenomena.” (p. 75).

Because modern mindfulness based approaches are derived from the Buddhist meditative tradition (Kabat Zinn, 2005, p. 25), they present a challenge to scientific research which needs a recognised and accepted theoretical framework. Even if, as for Kabat-Zinn (2003), the Buddha is seen, “*among other things as a born scientist*”, (p.145), Buddhism (i.e. the recorded teaching of the Buddha) is unlikely to be accepted as a valid theoretical framework within western science. McCracken & Thompson, (2009) argue that,

“[m]indfulness does not come originally from an empirical tradition or from within cognitive-behavioral psychology. This history is important to acknowledge. It did not derive from theory and testing before being applied to human behavior problems, as has been a tradition within CBT (Hayes and Shenk 2004) ... This current situation seems to require a theoretical framework that can accommodate and organize these processes in a scientifically useful way, such as the framework underlying ACT (Acceptance and commitment therapy) (Hayes et al., 1999).” (p.81).

Gordon (2009) very usefully examines these questions of methodology. He compares mechanistic (ie scientific) approaches to analysing a musical score and subjectivistic approaches to actually listening to the music. Of course, both can be rewarding and together may create a more complete picture:

“To the extent that mindfulness champions subjectivist thought styles while maintaining certain mechanistic assumptions, mindfulness can be understood as a subjectivist turn towards the space between thought collectives in a psychological community that has become dominated by the mechanistic thought collective.” (p. 6).

Gordon also sees Kabat- Zinn as bridging the two worlds:

*“While the methodologies of the RCT (Randomised Control Trial) are useful and necessary, Kabat- Zinn claims that they are also incomplete because **they omit the actual experience of mindfulness**, that is, the way in which patients find meaning in mindfulness. He then challenges the exclusive use of RCT among medical institutions, and calls for a plurality of input.” (p. 61, my emphasis).*

Kabat-Zinn (2005) confirms that mechanical descriptions tend to leave out “*our **experience and the mystery of experiencing.***” (Original emphasis), (p. 587).

Wallace suggests that the contemplative tradition could supplement the scientific tradition. He refers back to the failure of modern psychology to follow William James' direction which emphasised introspection with the result that: "*cognitive scientists have yet to devise any rigorous and precise introspective methods for observing mental phenomena.*" (Wallace, 2009, p. 167).

In my own teaching experience, I have a clear memory of running a course in Newhaven, East Sussex, the outcomes of which were measured with Core- 10, GAD-7 and PHQ-9 (UK measures to assess levels of stress, depression and anxiety). I remember attending a meeting where we looked at the changes, the percentage shifts, the median scores. I saw bare statistics of anxiety, depression and stress. On its own terms, it was completely valid; and yet this way of representing the course missed out all the people, the human beings who I had taught, sat with and listened to for ten weeks. The contrast between the figures and my lived memory of the experience of the group seemed very stark that day to me.

Kerr (2009) addresses these issues, suggesting that,

"{s}tudies like Allen et al (2009) report 'facts' very effectively, and develop useful models of treatment which lead to improved patient-care. This is invaluable. However, with their positivist bias, they risk leaving out the most tender aspects of human experience. I would argue that this omission is potentially at great cost to participants and to the culture of psychological therapies." (p.5).

These two perceptions of quantitative methods (both valuable and limited) have been a strong influence in the emergence of my thesis: how can mindfulness be effectively researched in a way which honours the rigour and discipline of science and yet includes the human dimension. As Carl Rogers pointed out in 1961, in relation to the scientific paradigm, "*I feel deep concern that the developing behavioural sciences may be used to control the individual and to rob him (sic) of his personhood. I believe, however, that these sciences might be used to enhance the person*" (Rogers, 1961, p. 361).

Here are highly charged issues of human interaction: which aspects of experiencing do we consider to be valid? Which approaches will attract funding? And, in particular what value, if any, is accorded to the experiencing of human beings outside of research conditions? I am

a Buddhist meditation teacher rather than a scientifically trained clinician. During my studies at Bangor University, I felt part of the coming together of western scientific models and contemplative practice which is creating such a rich body of inquiry. Another well known example is the series of meetings between the Dalai Lama and western psychologists as described, for example, in *Healing Emotions*, (Goleman, 1997).

I share Alan Wallace's hope, that "[a]s scientists and contemplatives collaborate in the investigation of the mind, which is so central to human existence, perhaps a comprehensive, fully integrated science of consciousness may emerge to the benefit of both traditions and the world at large." (Wallace, 2007, p. 64).

2. Heuristic inquiry

"The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social- and perhaps universal-significance." (Moustakas, 1990, p.15).

Bowling (2002) has pointed to situations where qualitative approaches will be more useful, *"where there is little pre-existing knowledge, the issues are sensitive or complex and the maximum opportunity for exploration and inductive hypothesis generation is required."* (Bowling, 2002, p. 352). In this study my intention was to describe the lived experience of six teachers who between them had a wealth of valuable insights. A qualitative study seemed to offer the best way to explore these insights and reflect deeply on them, staying close to the recorded words of the teachers.

I have chosen to use a heuristic methodology as described by Moustakas (1990) and refined by Sela-Smith (2002). I resonated strongly with this starting point:

"Heuristic inquiry is a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives." (Moustakas, 1990, p.15).

This accorded with my participation in the research questions as a human being and a teacher. This became an examination of my personal practice undertaken alongside open

discussions with peers and elders on the issues raised. The heuristic method allowed me to reflect closely on the conversations with co-researchers and also to acknowledge how my own “*experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the processes and outcomes of inquiry.*” (Etherington, 2004, p. 31).

This approach offered me a way of collecting reliable data about my chosen theme while avoiding the potential drawbacks of quantitative methods such as the reduction of the human element.

I chose the people to interview from my own network that I had built up during my studies at Bangor University and formulated the questions. All the interviews were transcribed by me. These transcripts were then edited according to the heuristic method laid out in Table 1 below, (p. 25) and the comments arranged into common themes. I have checked each stage of the process with all my co-researchers and remained open to any suggested amendments. My completed thesis will be made available to the co-researchers prior to submission. Also the provisional nature of my results is transparent. I am not claiming truth, objective or otherwise. I am presenting, as best I can, the results of my own reflections as enriched and expanded by my co-researchers. I carefully studied the potential blocks to the heuristic process and how these could be reduced by the perspectives of the co-researchers, a supportive therapeutic relationship and contemplative meditation and Focusing, (as described in Kerr, 2008). All of these methods helped me to become more sensitive to my own subjective impressions in relation to my ‘data’.

3. Method

Sample

Six mindfulness teachers (3 female, 3 male) were interviewed. Four of the teachers also train other teachers. One teacher has taught MBSR, the others have taught MBCT. Two of the teachers ‘identify’ as being Buddhist. The number of MBCT/MBSR courses taught by each teacher ranged from 10 to 75. Five of the teachers had trained as therapists. In the transcripts of the interviews my part of the conversations has also been included. My views are explicitly part of the data.

Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were of 1 -1.5 hours in duration (median, 76 mins), and were conducted by myself either by phone (one interview) or in co-researchers' homes or at a convenient venue. The instructions to participants, participation release agreement, risk management and interview schedule are in Appendices A, B, C and D respectively.

The research questions

1. Is the skill of turning towards difficult experience a central component of mindfulness teaching?
2. What are the factors which encourage the skill of approaching difficult experience with curiosity and acceptance?
3. What are the factors which make it more difficult?
4. Is there is a connection between how teachers relate to their own difficulties in (and outside) meditation and their ability to help students?

Equipment

Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder (Olympus Digital Voice Recorder WS – 321M), and subsequently transferred to CDs for transcription.

Transcription

Interviews were transcribed by myself and have been kept on a password protected hard drive.

Procedure for analysis

Data were analysed according to the heuristic method described by Moustakas (1990) and revised by Sela-Smith (2002). The stages of this analysis are shown in table 1 (Kerr, 2008) which I followed. This included an extra step, step 3 designed to focus on my own experiencing of the research questions. Excerpts from step 12, the composite depiction, appear in the results, Chapter 4 and individual depictions (step 13) will be found in the appendices E, F, G and H. Step 15, the creative synthesis forms Chapter 5. Focusing, a guided reflection practice, (Gendlin, 1978) has been an invaluable tool which has, in

addition, afforded an illuminating perspective on some key aspects of mindfulness practice (described in more detail in Chapter 6).

Table 1. Stages of the heuristic process (Kerr, 2008)

Purpose	Procedure
1 Data collection	Interviewing participants
2 Immersion in data	Listening to interviews, transcribing and re-reading transcripts
3 Reflection on researcher's own experience of the research questions	Focusing (Gendlin, 1978), observing own mindfulness practice, reading and journal writing.
4 Incubation	Setting aside data for two weeks
5 Review	Reviewing all material derived from each individual in turn
6 Overview	Making notes from data, identifying qualities and themes
7 Individual depictions	Construction of individual depictions of co-researchers descriptions and the researcher's experiencing, retaining original language and examples.
8 Checking depictions	Checking out the accuracy of depictions with co-researchers, and against the original data.
9 Revision	Revision of depictions if necessary, in light of co-researchers' comments.
10 Collection	Individual depictions are gathered together and studied
11 Incubation	Period of rest, to allow qualities and themes to be internalised.
12 Composite depiction	Composite depiction is produced, using illustrative examples taken verbatim from the data. The composite depiction includes all the core meanings of the phenomenon as experienced by the researcher and co-researchers.
13 Producing individual portraits	Individual portraits are derived from the raw data, from participants whose experiences exemplify that of the group as a whole.
14 Contemplation	Contemplative processes (mindfulness, focusing, recording of dreams and intuitions) are used to tap the

	researcher’s tacit-intuitive awareness of the core meanings of the data.
15 Creative synthesis	A creative synthesis of the researcher’s understanding is produced in the form of poetry or other creative expression.

Risk

I followed The British Psychological Society’s Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants (2009) which suggests that “*participants should not be exposed to risks greater than or additional to those encountered in their normal lifestyles.*”(p.11) In essence, the interviews were an invitation to reflect on the co-researchers’ teaching practice which kept the discussions within their ‘normal lifestyles.’

The Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology, University of Bangor approved this study.

Consent and withdrawal

All co-researchers gave their informed consent to participate in the study. I explained to co-researchers the purpose and content of the study, and what they would be asked to do. There was no pressure for the interviews to follow a particular format. The questions sent out in advance were a guideline for discussion. Co-researchers were given the option of withdrawing from the study at any time, should they want to. All co-researchers were asked to approve the summaries (steps 12 and 13, table 1) which formed the basis of the results chapter, and all gave their approval to proceed.

Debriefing

After each interview I ensured that my co- researchers had the opportunity to debrief and ask any questions about the interview and research process

Confidentiality

All the interviews have been kept confidential and presented in my results without identifying the co-researchers.

Summary of Chapter 3

My own study takes place against a backdrop of important issues of methodology. I value the contribution of quantitative research and hope that other, qualitative, voices can also be heard and appreciated as valid contributions to human understanding. I have chosen the heuristic method as the best way of investigating my research questions which are very significant in my own life as a mindfulness teacher.

Chapter 4. Results

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the results of the interviews that I carried out with six experienced teachers of MBSR or MBCT. I analyse and explore the results more fully in Chapter 6.

Initially, I suggested four main research questions as a basis for our discussions:

- 1. Is the skill of turning towards difficult experience a central component of mindfulness teaching?**
- 2. What are the factors which encourage in students the skill of approaching difficult experience?**
- 3. What are the factors which make this skill more difficult?**
- 4. Is there is a connection between how teachers relate to their own difficulties in (and outside) meditation and their ability to help students?**

The original questions for the interviews can be found in Appendix D.

Over many months, I transcribed all the recorded interviews and from this process of listening and reflecting, I drew out the main themes from each teacher. When I collated these, I found that there was a significant convergence of opinions about the most important issues.

The five main themes which emerged from the interviews with the six co-researchers were:

- A. The skill of turning towards difficulty is a central component of mindfulness teaching.
- B. The invitational approach from teachers has a crucial importance in helping students learn this skill.
- C. Kindness is a vital component in teaching the skill of turning towards difficulty
- D. The attitude and expression of the teacher (embodiment) plays a crucial role in teaching.

- E. The teachers' personal experience of the challenges of mindfulness practice allows them to teach with greater authenticity.

A composite picture of the data is presented below. This is drawn from summaries of transcripts (Step 12 table 1), which retained the words of the co-researchers (identified by letters A to F) and myself. The comments of the six teachers are in *italics*. My comments during the interviews are in 11 font and [parantheses]. Any later clarifications are in 12 font and (brackets).

Individual illustrative portraits of co-researchers' experiences (Step 13 table 1) from the transcript summaries are presented in appendices E –H.

A. Is the skill of turning towards difficult experience a central component of mindfulness teaching?

Teachers of MBCT and MBSR were asked if they considered turning towards difficulty as being central to the mindfulness approach:

My sense ... is that right from the beginning that we're helping people work with difficulty
[Are you thinking of the bodyscan?]

The bodyscan ... initially people's uncomfortableness being in a group, it feeling maybe a bit odd eating the raisin in this way (an eating meditation often done in session 1), the mind wandering. (F).

If she (an experienced MBSR teacher) thinks it's central to MBSR, if anything, it's even more central to MBCT. (B).

There was some discussion about the phrase 'turning or moving towards' and the focus on 'difficult experience', can that include pleasant as well as unpleasant experiences?

You said something about moving towards ... we sometimes talk about embracing too ... Is it actually just opening to, allowing it into full view along with all the things you like as well? Moving towards sounds quite active. (D.)

'The one thing I want to say ... is turning towards all of your experience including the difficult. because actually the pleasurable can be a load of trouble too, certainly in my life. (D).

If turning towards difficulties is central, it can be overemphasised in mindfulness teaching:

One thing I wanted to say about this turning towards the difficult being overemphasised. ... on one of the TDRs (Teacher development retreats), someone at the end of it ... said ... where is the joy, you've forgotten the joy! Actually, I thought it was a really good point. (C).

Teachers did not suggest that students should be able to welcome every aspect of life:

[You don't feel you should be able to welcome everything]

Not yet

[So the fact that you can't welcome something is ok with you]

Absolutely delightful (E).

Why do mindfulness teachers ask students to do something as counterintuitive as turning towards difficulty?

It would seem that ... the heart of the idea behind MBCT... that there is unsatisfactoriness.... Some of that causes various degrees of difficulty and ultimately we need to learn ways to be with that experience and not be adding to it and that is going to help us.

[that mental health is about learning to accept that there is unsatisfactoriness in life?]

and change the way that we relate to it and I think we can't do that unless we practise being with that. (F).

B. The invitational approach

All the teachers spoke of the importance of the invitational approach, offering students permission to choose whether to turn towards or away from difficulty. This was contrasted with the teacher pushing, or being 'evangelical'.

I do think there are times when folks have had a severe trauma, and we really have to honour that, and if you move into someone a couple of times, and they don't want to do it, ok. Just put it out that you may sometime want to look at this a little closer but I understand that it doesn't feel good right now, that's ok. (A).

So it's really much more coming round to the spirit of seeing what happens in reality if you respond in this way, or if you respond that way rather from some ideological position, thou shalt not avoid, thou shalt face. (B).

This invitational approach can be encouraged in many ways

All I can say is: You've been working at it this way, it hasn't helped, give it a twirl to try it this way and when you're lying down and doing the bodyscan and something comes up, it's too damn painful, get up, get yourself a glass, a cup of tea, move around the room and do something else. (A).

and then a sense of asking permission, checking in with the person and maybe asking them, would it be ok if I asked a bit more about that now or would you prefer, or would it be more helpful actually if we moved on? ... gauging from them, so actually trying to convey a sense of, it would be ok to talk about this a bit more but It's also fine not to, where are they at with it? (F).

I can think of someone who was becoming distressed and ... said I don't want to take part in this exercise. I said that was absolutely fine. I ... said something like ... it's really helpful to have said that as well because ... one of the key things about this is that we feel able to say no to some things, it's really helpful to give that example to the group. (F).

One challenge was how to balance the invitation with the teacher's own experience and views.

I think sometimes we can do a disservice to people if we don't share what our view is. But I think there can be a tone to it. ... it goes back for me to attachment, how attached are we to someone getting better ... how much can we say I have strong views that if you carry on eating those big macs in the way that you're doing, you're going to die early. If you eat the salads, or eat more of the salads and less of the big macs, it's going to be helpful. I'd really like you to do that, that's my view of what would be helpful but ultimately I'm not going to force you to do that, you're giving them a strong steer on it but then it's up to them. (F).

You've described over five years how you've become more flexible and less evangelical and somehow walking this line between being so rigid that the thing becomes counterproductive on the one hand and so flexible that you actually end up doing something that bears very little relationship to what we know is effective. (B).

And what can get in the way of being invitational?

As I've got older, the drawbacks are about my ego and if I'm trying to get somebody to look at their difficulty because I think it will make me a better teacher, I can do damage to people, if I'm not really sensitive to where they are, because pushing somebody past the place where they are able to go is dangerous. (A).

[I can look back at my teaching time and remember a time when I was starting off when I was quite evangelical about this subject and I got tremendous resistance from people, there was a kind of battle, a struggle with me saying 'you've got to do this' and them saying 'no I don't want to']
Absolutely, spot on.

[And my more recent teaching is this is a possibility you could try, when you feel ready for a second or a minute, giving people much more options around when they do it]
That's been exactly my trajectory and development as a teacher, evangelical is a wonderful word for it. (A).

We discussed how the students' difficulties need to be respected:

One woman after we'd done that meditation said what if you can't turn towards it, what if you can't go anywhere near this and he (another student) said it's just a thought, you know the drill, have a thought, oh it's just a thought and let it go. She drew herself up ... she said so you're suggesting that I can do that when I think of the fact that my whole family were murdered, the room went ... I said no of course this isn't what you would do. The first thing you have to do is see what you're feeling and cradle that, no one is asking you to just drop the idea, see it as just a thought in that way. It was actually hugely powerful but this was his very lightweight take on it and here we were with someone who had suffered one of the worst things possible. (C).

Invitation also includes offering a graduated path of practice, not all or nothing:

In other words, it's an attenuated version of turning towards your difficulty, I'm not turning towards it but I'm not excluding it either, I'm inviting people to see that they don't have to accept it completely ... that if you don't feel you can welcome something at least can you be with it as a preliminary step

[So it's giving people more possibilities?]

more possibilities, you don't actually have to turn all the way towards

[It's not an absolute because the poem (The Guest House, appendix I) suggests welcome them at the door laughing and one of my students said I can't do that but I can put my gun down!]

Exactly. Working with metaphors is just brilliant and that poem will evoke that, it's superb (E).

... part of what we teach in that meditation is that you can move towards it and back again, you can dip your toe in the water and then that's too much for the moment. I think this is really important, that there are times when it's not right for people to go there. After all, avoidance is a survival mechanism and there are times when you need that to survive and there are other times when we can move towards ourselves. (C).

A detailed description of co-researcher F's experience of 'the invitational approach' can be found in Appendix E.

C. The place of kindness

All the co-researchers emphasised that kindness and gentleness were crucial in helping people to turn towards difficult experience.

I always encourage people to take care of themselves first and foremost. I think the emphasis on kindness and compassion is hugely helpful in teaching this, I think it's a big feature of it. (C).

A key thing ... is a foundation of kindness which is one of the things I try to get across, a combination of kindness and awareness so that we try and bring awareness to that choice and then whatever we choose to do is with a sense of kindness. So if we choose to turn away from the difficult, meeting that with a sense of kindness. If we choose to stay with it, then from a place of kindness as well. (F).

the specific practice of turning towards the difficult and the whole of the 8 week programme is bathed in some sense of kindness and compassion, not necessarily in terms of any specific practices, but if one can at every opportunity set that tone, so that while giving that message about moving into the pain in the knee and not necessarily moving away straightaway, it's done with a clear message of prioritising kindness and compassion. (B).

To me the encouragement of the instructor is all part of that scaffolding, whether it's awareness, whether it's kindness or the support of the group but the stance of the instructor saying well you can do this, it's ok, I've done it, I recommend it but at the same time, leaving it open, not allowing the encouragement to become a pressure that you have to do this now, whatever's going on, risking people feeling a failure if they don't want to do it. (F).

How, then, this attitude of kindness is best conveyed to students, implicitly or explicitly?

Yes and of course we talk about it (kindness) all the time, in the words we use and our own attitude, hopefully ... This brings up ... more questions as we don't do the loving kindness meditation very much although we talk about holding ourselves with compassion, gentleness and all those things. (C).

And it's a very well rehearsed discussion about the problems of depression and kindness about the way in which, in the moment, it's largely dependent on the qualities of the instructor to imbue everything with, rather than necessarily to have formal practices along those lines. (B).

D. The impact of 'embodiment' of mindfulness by the teachers

The co-researchers examined how the teacher's personal attitude to difficulty in the class has an impact on how the students learn how to turn towards difficulty.

By far the most powerful teaching, I think, comes from the way in which the instructor relates to people experiencing difficulty, particularly early on. When I used to be looking at videos of instructors in training ... that piece about what happens when somebody in session 2 really throws a wobbly or is in quite a bit of distress, seemed to be very diagnostic, in the sense that many instructors would briefly acknowledge it, then move away from it, rather than move right into it ... how the instructor actually handled these spontaneously arising difficulties, particularly at the emotional level, seemed to be a crucial piece of the sense I got of their overall effectiveness. (B).

It seems to me the crucial learning very often is much more at the implicit level, every opportunity when something difficult comes up, the stance of the instructor, in terms of ignoring it or moving away from it or reassuring as opposed to moving in, really being interested, that seems to be the business

[Which can include things like people coming in late, people saying I haven't done any home practice this week, not just the participants getting distressed but them saying ... 'I found your CDs really boring']

Exactly, because I think the willingness to be curious and investigate all stuff ... to really take it all as grist to the mill ... a) takes some time to acquire, that willingness on the part of the instructor and b) is a very, very powerful embodiment of the message you're trying to give ... that somewhat artificial exercise is not really the thing around which all the facing the difficult should hang. Probably they would have got already more mileage from the instructions and their experience with how to relate to pain. Because that's already giving the message of exploring, being interested in it

[Or boredom or discomfort in the bodyscan]

those are nice examples about people not doing their home work, for the stance to lean forward and be really interested, here's a real opportunity for learning here, conveys a very powerful message. (B).

When life is going swimmingly, you can talk about turning towards the difficult, you can recall the times when you've done it but it's not actually happening whereas when it's actually happening there's a deep resonance there (C).

At the same time, there may be dangers if teachers reveal personal issues in the class:

The sense of taking one's own state and using that as part of the teaching. It's a very difficult one but the power of saying well, one could do it at a relatively non-threatening level, by saying 'I've had a very busy day today, my mind's all over the place, shall we all take a three minute breathing space now? That would be really helpful for me'. (B).

I learned a lot from Y around this, so she can burst into tears over something and I've seen her do it on a few occasions when she's teaching a group of people and still they have the sense that there's something underneath that, that this is just her transparency and that gives them a lot of permission. So transparency can never be divorced from responsibility and otherwise it becomes self indulgent and also you're not doing your job. But I think the

more transparent you can become coupled strongly with responsibility, the more potent that is for people (D).

A real test for teachers of the 'embodiment' of mindfulness is when their teaching goes awry:

Do you ever feel you've messed up? Yes! That you've had problems with a student? Yes. Failed? Yes! Felt not up to it? Yes, not good enough? Yes! Your teaching has become mechanical? Yes!! (A).

I had one man and he was in AA, in recovery and I gave this little thing about hope was an illusion, hope just took you out of the moment and he had built his entire structure on hope [You took it away]

Ooooh yeah, I won't do that one again!

[You couldn't have foreseen that could you?]

I couldn't but what I could have foreseen was that I was much more dogmatic than invitational. I'd just read this article on hope and this was interesting ... I could have been far more skilful and he might have been a little grumpy but he wouldn't have had an explosion (A).

A key area seemed to be how teachers work with distressed or challenging students as a way of embodying the meeting with difficulty:

When you used the word distressed I just want to move towards them. That's very familiar to me. I feel open hearted and warm. However it's the person who is bored, challenging or angry who is more difficult to do that with. (D)

[How are you with people getting upset, sad?]

There's an anxiety coming up, that would be my most common reaction

[Some kind of tightening?]

Yes, how am I going to manage this? How are other people in the group going to relate to this? (F).

At least what I try to do if anyone's becoming distressed would be first of all to greet that with a sense of kindness (F).

So in inquiry ... when the person comes back to me and says something and I think why do they have to be so narrow about it, why can't they see the bigger picture that I'm trying to get across to them, irritation arising. How do I then respond rather than react? (D)

A detailed description of three co-researchers' experience of 'embodiment' can be found in Appendices F, G and H

E. Personal experience of mindfulness practice

How, then, had teachers' own experiences of mindfulness practice influenced their teaching, especially around working with difficulties?

I'm still having anxiety in my life about being an imposter; having anxiety in my life a lot but it's something I can move into and watch, guess what? It's impermanent, oh my goodness what a surprise! There it ties in to the essence of Buddhism or the thing that's most important to me, the concept of impermanence. All these things we're scared of are really impermanent, they move away, they come back, oh well

[And if you don't allow something into view, you can't see that it's impermanent?] (A).

Personally even as an experienced meditator and mindfulness teacher only a year ago ... I was in a real turmoil ... about the state of the world ... I spent ages working with this, being with, thinking I was being with it. It took me months ... to realise that what I was subtly doing was trying to change it and make it different ... I hadn't allowed myself to really move up close to it; of course it's excruciating to do that

I spent all this time breathing with it, working with loving kindness, noticing where I felt it in my body, but I really hadn't fully moved up to it and it took me ages to get there. So these people, if they've have only done 8 weeks. (C).

I think again about my own difficulties in meditation, moving towards them at my own pace. If you'd told me I had to do it, I would have stopped meditating years ago. (A).

I'd said that I couldn't teach people who were in chronic pain and then I broke my leg and I've been in chronic pain, on and off and you know what, this stuff works!

It's problematic but I notice that if I will sit with the pain and be curious about it, it won't get in the way of my day but if I hop around on it saying ... why, nagging at me, at a hundred levels I contract, my whole body contracts. Simple. And the same thing is true about emotional pain. If I have a struggle with one of my kids or somebody close to me ... if I can sit down with my sadness or frustration, even cry, something softens in me and I can be compassionate towards myself and my aggressor for want of a better term. (A).

Summary of Chapter 4

The main results from the views of the six co-researchers were that

- The skill of turning towards difficulty is a central component of mindfulness teaching.
- The invitational approach from teachers has a crucial importance in helping students learn this skill.
- Kindness is a vital component in teaching the skill of turning towards difficulty
- The attitude and expression of the teacher plays a crucial role in teaching
- The teachers' personal experience of the challenges of mindfulness practice allows them to teach with greater authenticity.

Chapter 5 A Creative Synthesis

“The creative synthesis can only be achieved through tacit and intuitive powers”

(Moustakas, 1990, p. 31).

In heuristic methodology, the creative synthesis takes shape as an artistic representation of the results and reflections on them (Casterline, 2009). After many hours looking at databases, I feel very drawn to poetry, Focusing (Gendlin, 1978) and fiction to illustrate the themes of this study. In this chapter, I have chosen to use the figure of the Fool who has come to symbolise a way of being with the difficult which I aspire to. The Fool and research papers seem to occupy very different worlds. And yet perhaps there are connections?

In my perception, the Fool is in the ‘being’ mode rather than the ‘doing/driven’ mode (Segal et al., 2002). He/she is in touch with the suffering in life and also the joy. Cecil Collins, the English painter and critic, wrote in his ‘Vision of the Fool’ that “[t]he Saint, the artist, the poet and the Fool are one” (Collins, 2002, p. 103) and how on April Fools day,

“[t]he Fool who, wearing his fantastic garments of love, makes his wild painful gestures of tenderness before the suffering of all the living ones in the universe ... his face full of the gaiety of the wine of life, drawing its lights from the source of tears and sharp sorrow; the Fool, who in an ecstasy of happiness bows down with his gay garments, down into the dust, with a humility that touches the bottom of the abyss of life.” (p. 100).

In one of my interviews in late 2009 I discussed this capacity to be with suffering and joy with co-researcher C: how, as teachers, we can convey this awareness to students to the degree that we are in touch with it ourselves:

“how that beauty, that excitingness, specialness ... that gives the present moment its bloom, is there even in your darkest hour ... with the breathing space and bringing your mindfulness and awareness to the situation, you widen your perspective, you can be more aware of these other things, like the smile of your grandchild or the full moon on a frosty night.”

And in another interview, (with co-researcher D), we discussed how the Fool (like a clown) is willing to fall over and look foolish. For me this contrasted with my fear of looking stupid in groups. Santorelli (1999), suggests that helplessness, the letting go of control is part of the teacher opening to difficulty, as “[t]his uncertainty, this helplessness, points to where we are encountering our limitations and our hard edges.” (p. 144).

The Fool (in my conception at least) has gained some insight from meeting suffering and staying open to joy as articulated by Mary Oliver in this excerpt from her poem ‘*In Blackwater woods*’,

*“To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.” (Oliver, 1983, p.82).*

Perhaps the Fool comes close to Rogers’ view of a fully functioning person?

“Finally, such a person lives a life which involves a wider range, a greater richness, than the constricted living in which most of us find ourselves. It seems to me that clients who have moved significantly in therapy live more intimately with their feelings of pain, but also more vividly with their feelings of ecstasy; that anger is more clearly felt, but so also is love; that fear is an experience they know more deeply, but so is courage; and the reason they can thus live fully in a wider range is that they have this underlying confidence in themselves as trustworthy instruments for encountering life.” (1961, p.95)

I had a number of Focusing sessions as I came to write this section which I recorded.

It’s almost like I had a direct acknowledgement of my whole thesis, without going into any explanation ... If I can meet, make contact with my experience, even if it’s painful or difficult and I’m bringing an attitude of hospitality to it, then that is connecting with joy, that’s the meeting, it’s not like I need to find joyful experience as well, (June 23 2010).

My path to this culminating point has been long, demanding and worthwhile. I wrote the poem below as an aspirational description of the perfect mindfulness teacher. Here is one of the frequent paradoxes of mindfulness practice: a movement towards perfection (or towards greater depth or skill) and the willingness to be with oneself exactly as one is.

From Broadmoor to Glyndebourne

Dancing with all that life can offer

Joy and sadness, loss and beauty,

Not pessimistic, all life is suffering

Not positive thinking, always look on the bright side of life

Embracing the paradox

Laughing, whirling and yet completely centred

Able to lose balance, fall over and get up again

Feeling others pain and yet radiating equanimity,

Meeting fear with gentleness.

Carefree and totally connected

The Fool enters into the next emerging moment.

Chapter 6 Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

In this Chapter, I will consider my results as a whole and in relation to the relevant literature. I will also look at the limitations of my study and make suggestions for future research and suggest some practical implications for training teachers.

1. Discussion of the results

A. Turning towards difficult experience is a central component of mindfulness teaching.

My first research question was: Is the skill of turning towards difficult experience a central component of mindfulness teaching? Clearly, turning towards difficulty is regarded as central to mindfulness teaching and practice by all the teachers whom I interviewed. The primary texts of MBSR/MBCT (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal et al., 2002) describe the process, in general terms, of students being guided in this approach. Other commentaries (Baer, 2006; Crane, 2009; Santorelli, 1999) confirm that ‘putting out a red carpet’ for unwelcome experience is a core element of MBSR/MBCT.

My second research question was: what are the factors which encourage in students the skill of approaching difficult experience? The first main factor is the invitational approach (explored in section B). The second main factor is the place of kindness (section C) and the third factor the embodiment of the teacher (Section D).

My third research question was: what are the factors which make this skill (of turning towards difficulties) more difficult? These emerge as the absence of the helpful factors ie less emphasis on the invitational approach, less emphasis on kindness and the teacher being less able to embody the principles of mindfulness.

B. The crucial importance of the invitational approach

In the interviews, this was viewed as crucial in teaching MBSR/MBCT. This may be simply because coercion, the opposite of invitation, invites either submission or rebellion (Rosenberg, 1999). Invitation is also an embodiment of the mindful approach: teachers are inviting students to make their own choices about how to be with their experience. This sense of permission and freedom is highly valued by students. Of course there are ‘edges’ to this. At the same time students are encouraged to take on the discipline of regular, ideally daily, practice. And the teachers clearly believe in and appreciate the benefits of mindfulness. This may lead to being overly zealous. The main obstacle to being invitational seemed to be the teacher’s ego and becoming evangelical. Balancing these different tensions requires maturity and practice. The importance of students taking care of themselves and feeling free can (and ideally will) begin at the first session. The invitational stance is part of the attitude of gentleness which may be one of the key ‘mechanisms of change’ (Kuyken, 2008). How far does this extend? In session 1, do teachers offer students the option of not taking part in the raisin exercise (eating a raisin mindfully)? At what point does invitation become unhelpful non participation? These are issues that are worked out in the class rather than resolved on paper.

C. The place of kindness

The co-researchers all agreed that kindness makes turning towards difficulties more possible. We also discussed how kindness is part of a broader factor of emotional support which has resonances with Rogers’ core conditions which support successful therapy, (Elias, 2001). This support may consist of respect, calm, kindness and group solidarity. Co-researcher A noted that when students calm down, they are able to step out of the drama of their lives and this can allow them to see more clearly the transitory nature of their experience. Co-researcher B suggested that the structure of MBSR/MBCT is designed to give skills in the first half to ‘get the mind in the right place’ and then in the second half to move on towards the challenging. Co-researcher F highlighted the need for ego strength to contain turning towards the difficult and the more difficult things are, the more strength and degree of settled mind are needed to be able to contain that.

In traditional Buddhist meditation, this relationship between a more calm and stable mind, and looking at the more challenging aspects of life such as impermanence is described (in Pali) as samatha (calming) and vipassanā (insight). Gethin (1998) comments, “... *it is clear that in developed Buddhist theory, the two aspects of meditation, calm and insight are seen as together forming the basis for the realisation of the Buddhist goal.*’ (p.175).

In modern times, we can see this relationship appearing again, suggesting it is a natural occurrence:

“The means towards experiencing “being mode” is the development of awareness and acceptance through the practice of mindfulness meditation. There are two aspects to this process – known sometimes as calming or “concentration” practices and “insight” practices. Both are woven into the teaching throughout, but there is a greater emphasis on learning to calm, settle and gather the mind in the first half of the programme” (Crane, 2009, p. 46).

In relation to mindfulness and kindness and compassion, the connection seems to be both explicit and implicit (Germer, 2009; Gilbert, 2005, 2009; Neff, 2003). More research is needed to explore if more self compassion would arise from explicit loving kindness or compassion practices such as metta bhavana. Perhaps it is better for this flavour of gentleness to be gradually conveyed through the teacher’s attitude and guidance? And the effect may vary for different people. The opposite of self compassion, self criticism (aversion to oneself) in students is an important area for mindfulness teachers to identify as it is linked to negative rumination, (Segal et al., 2002).

Focusing may shine some useful light on how to turn towards and include exiled and unwanted parts of ourselves, in other words of turning towards inner difficulty,

*“Presence is ... the ability or state of **being with** any inner experience, with interested curiosity and without judgment. ... In Presence we are able to turn toward whatever we feel, whatever is going on in us, with gentleness, with trust in its underlying life-forward direction. In Presence we are not trying to change what we find, but only to hear it , so that it can find its own change if it needs to”* (original italics in bold) (Cornell, 2005, p.112).

D. The impact of ‘embodiment’ of mindfulness by the teachers

‘The instructor has the opportunity to embody this sense of curiosity and adventure in the way he or she handles issues that arise in the class.’ (Segal et al., 2002, p. 114).

Co-researchers agreed that the embodiment of mindfulness is a key part of teaching students how to turn towards difficulty. They reported a variable tolerance in themselves to student difficulties such as anger, doubt, acting out, lateness, resistance, as well as sadness, despair, anxiety, and confusion.

Many questions arise here which are not easily answered but would be excellent topics for trainee teachers. It would be helpful to consider what gets in the way of embodiment.

Insufficient personal experience of mindfulness practice will be a common factor.

Overreliance on theory and status as a therapist are likely to be issues for psychologists.

Embodiment will be affected by how teachers deal with their own personal difficulties such as tiredness, illness, irritation, intolerance, burn out, sexual attraction, feeling not good enough, or wanting to look impressive.

In this process, therapy training (Pope & Tabachnick, 1993), and Focusing, (Cornell 2005), could offer useful insights. For example,

“I used to cringe when someone in a workshop, let’s say, raised a complaint or a dissatisfaction ... I wanted to avoid conflict at all costs. Anger was the scariest emotion I could encounter. Now I turn toward angry complaints with delight. I’m delighted about encountering the real person who is feeling the anger, and finding out what that person’s needs are. It’s because of Focusing with my own inner criticising parts that this has changed.” (Cornell, 2005, p. 125).

E. The significance of personal practice for the teachers.

This section relates to my fourth research question: Is there is a connection between how teachers relate to their own difficulties in (and outside) meditation and their ability to help students? From the interviews it was clear that the teachers’ personal experience of the challenges of mindfulness practice allows them to teach with greater authenticity.

A useful reflection in the area of personal practice might be that our sense of the difficult could be different to that of students. Teachers need to consider how students hear the suggestion of opening to pain. They may hear this as a suggestion to ruminate. Sometimes focusing on the difficult amplifies it and this can give rise to doubt in students. Can we ask people to turn towards difficulties that we have not had ourselves?

In mindfulness teaching, helping others work with difficulties is not something that can be learned solely from books. Personal practice of meeting the challenges that mindfulness involves means that relating to students comes from the heart and not the textbook. Having one's own daily practice and attending longer retreats are the foundation for teaching. In MBSR and MBCT this connection between personal practice and the capacity to teach is well established (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Segal et al., 2002).

“In our experience, unless the instructor’s relationship to mindfulness is grounded in extensive personal practice, the teaching and guidance one might bring to the clinical context will have little in the way of appropriate energy, authenticity, or ultimate relevance, and that deficit will soon be felt by program participants.” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.150).

2. The place of the body in turning towards difficulty

Bringing a gentle, friendly attention to the body as a way of working with emotional difficulties and reversing the tendency to move away from the difficult is emphasised in MBSR and MBCT (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal et al., 2002).

“Also letting go of aversion in the body may be easier and more relevant to the needs of participants who have been depressed, because it provides an alternative to an approach based on thoughts. Focusing on the body may help participants avoid getting caught up in ruminative patterns of thinking.” (Segal et al., 2002 pp. 227-228).

Focusing (Cornell, 2005; Gendlin, 1978) has explored a number of key aspects of relating to inner experiencing such as turning towards difficulty, what is really meant by ‘the body’ and the ‘felt sense’. Germer (2005) comments that “[t]he work of Eugene Gendlin, especially his idea of the preverbal, bodily “felt sense” of a psychological problem is strikingly similar to mindfulness oriented psychotherapy.” (p. 22).

Mindfulness teachers often encourage students to become more aware of physical sensations. A commonly heard question in the investigative inquiry process is ‘where do you feel that in your body?’ What does the teacher mean by body? And what does the person receiving the question understand? This has been explored in great detail in Focusing,

“Focusing is a body-based process. It happens, we say, in the body. And this statement gives rise to much trouble, because, in fact, we do not all mean the same thing by the word ‘body’. What is even more problematic: People who know Focusing do not mean the same thing by “body” as non-Focusers do, because Focusers have had experiences that have transformed what “body” means to us.” (Cornell, 2005, p.221).

3. Limitations of the research

I interviewed six teachers who, to varying degrees, were known to me personally. Interviewing complete strangers would, no doubt, be very different. My own experience as a teacher has no doubt played a role in my choice of questions, the themes that have stood out for me and the whole construction of the results. In this experiment the observer is clearly influencing the data!

4. Future research topics

- In this study I interviewed experienced mindfulness teachers. It would be very valuable to explore these questions with students from MBSR/MBCT courses: how did they get on with this approach of turning towards difficulty, what did they find helpful and unhelpful? How was their experience influenced by the attitude of the instructor?
- Mindfulness teachers need to embody mindfulness (Crane, 2009). How significant then is bodywork training such as yoga or tai ch’i? Many teachers report a lack of confidence in teaching mindful movement (a key aspect of an MBCT or MBSR course). In America, the Center for Mindfulness training brochure states that *“[r]ecognizing the body as a vehicle for mindfulness is essential. We recommend*

that you practice and train in mindful hatha yoga, or in some other form of body-centered awareness practice.”(CFM, 2009). Intriguingly, Carmody & Baer (2008) found that mindful yoga, more than other mindful practices such as the bodyscan or sitting meditation, was associated with changes in other variables, including increased mindfulness skills, reduced symptoms, and improved well-being.

- How could Focusing (Cornell 2005; Gendlin, 1978) illuminate some key aspects of mindfulness practice such as ‘befriending’ difficult parts of oneself and clarifying how to work with the ‘felt sense’ in the body?
- What is the relationship between the capacity to meet difficulty and the ability to accentuate the positive? *“The remedy is not to suppress negative experiences; when they happen, they happen. Rather it is to foster positive experiences ...”* (Hanson, 2009, p.68).
- Are attachment/aversion equal triggers for rumination/doing mode? How attachment and aversion towards pleasant and unpleasant experiences contribute to the ‘doing’ mode (Segal et al., 2002) is a complex area. In addition to the usual combination, (attached to the pleasant, averse to the unpleasant), we can become attached to negative experiences and averse to positive ones, (Gilbert, 2009). More investigation here would be helpful.
- How curiosity is a key factor in turning towards difficulty. *‘A key intention is to spark the person’s curiosity about their experience’* (Crane, 2009, p. 147).
- The question of the implicit/explicit contribution of kindness/compassion in MBSR/MBCT teaching.
- In relation to the CDs which are given out for home practice, is it kinder to offer students shorter practices? In my own experience I have noticed how easy it is to respond to the constant feedback of students, ‘I’ve so little time’, ‘I found that

practice so long'. I have made a CD with practices like the bodyscan or sitting meditation of thirty minutes rather than forty five. More research would be helpful into the relative benefits of longer practices compared to shorter ones such as the three minute breathing space as taught in MBCT (Segal et al., 2002).

5. Implications for practice

Suggestions for teacher training

Some themes have emerged from the interviews and my own reflections in relation to training teachers:

- More explicit attention could be given to trainee teachers in relation to helping participants learn how to be with difficulties. This skill may, however, best emerge from actual teaching experience.
- More examination of the role of the body in mindful practice and more encouragement for teachers to develop their own body awareness practice eg yoga, tai chi, aikido, Alexander technique, Feldenkrais, Focusing.
- More emphasis on hands on training, working with experienced teachers on eight week courses. The Center for Mindfulness in Massachusetts offers this kind of training through its practicum (CFM, 2010).

Final Conclusion

This topic of turning towards (and by implication, away from) difficulties is a hugely important aspect of mindfulness teaching. Due to space restrictions I have omitted a large number of insightful suggestions from my interviews. How human beings react or respond to the inevitable difficulties in their lives has a major impact on the quality of their mental health. This is one of the primary lessons that can be made available during a MBSR or MBCT course. As I wrote in my initial proposal to the Bangor University ethics committee: 'The potential value of exploring this issue is that developing greater understanding of this area could inform the ways in which mindfulness-based courses are taught, thus making the approach more effective.'

My hope is that the benefits of mindfulness will continue to become widely available and continue to relieve suffering.

I first read the words below from the Dhammapada, (Mascaro, 1973) as a troubled law student meeting difficulty in 1979 (my difficulty was that I did not want to be a lawyer!). It pointed me towards the centrality of the mind in experiencing, a topic which continues to fascinate me and forms a backdrop to my current teaching of mindfulness.

*What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.
If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart.
What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.
If a man speaks or acts with a pure mind, joy follows him as his own shadow. (p.35).*

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Appendix A

Initial letter to co –researchers

Dh Taravajra

Taravajra@ntlworld.com

A heuristic inquiry into the experience of turning towards difficult experience in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teaching.

Letter to potential interviewees

October, 2009

Dear,

Research study title: **A heuristic inquiry into the experience of turning towards difficult experience in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teaching.**

Supervisors: Rebecca Crane and Margaret Kerr

I am writing to request your help with a small-scale research project in which I am engaged. The project will be submitted as part fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of MA with Bangor University.

Developing greater understanding of what helps or hinders people to ‘turn towards difficult experience’ could inform the ways in which mindfulness-based courses are taught, thus making the approach more effective. An exploration of how experienced teachers embody and communicate this skill will be of significance for other mindfulness based teachers and those engaged in training teachers. This will then benefit those who attend mindfulness-based courses.

I am intending to gather information on this by interviewing experienced MBCT and MBSR teachers. I would greatly appreciate your involvement in this. The interview would last up to one hour and a half; would be conducted in person at a convenient location for you and would be recorded to enable me to analyse the material. If that's not possible, then we could perhaps talk over the telephone. I would send to you the questions that I wish to ask in advance to enable you to have time to reflect on them before we talk.

The research will be kept strictly confidential. No one except myself and potentially Rebecca Crane and Margaret Kerr who are supervising me on this study will hear the recording of the interview. The recording will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at 79 Bear Rd, Brighton. The recording will be erased once the thesis is completed. Any electronic data from the research, which is kept on my computer, will be coded and anonymous.

Information in any report or paper written about the research will be anonymous: your name will not be used, and nothing that could identify you will be included. Any third parties that are mentioned in the interviews will also have their identity obscured. I will send you a copy of my notes after the interview to check if I've represented you accurately and, to check on any outstanding confidentiality/disclosure issues, and to see if you have any further thoughts stimulated by my notes. I will send you a copy of the dissertation before I submit to give you the opportunity to comment.

The dissertation once written up would be publicly available but not, in the first instance published. I will send to you a copy of the completed study. If, in the future, I decide to publish some of the material, your agreement will be sought to whatever is written.

There is no payment for taking part in the research.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part – there is no pressure on you to do so. If you do decide to take part please sign and return the attached consent form. I will then contact you to arrange a time when we can talk together. If you do decide to take part, you can leave the research at any time, without giving any reason.

If you have any queries, or want any further information, please contact the researcher:

Dh Taravajra Tel: 07985314181

E: Taravajra@ntlworld.com

If at any time you have any complaint about the way that the research has been conducted, please contact:

Professor Oliver Turnbull, Head of School of Psychology, Bangor University, Gwynedd, LL57 2DG.

With best wishes

Taravajra

www.mindfullyoga.co.uk

Appendix B

Consent Form

Title of Project: A heuristic inquiry into the experience of turning towards difficult experience in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teaching.

Name of Researcher: Dh Taravajra
79 Bear Road Brighton BN2 4DB
E: Taravajra@ntlworld.com
T: 07985 314181

I confirm that I have read and understand the letter giving information on the study dated November 1st 2009. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. I agree to take part in the above study and I give my consent to my interview being recorded.

Name of Participant Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature

(Please keep one copy for your records and return a signed copy to the above address)

Appendix C

Risk assessment and management procedure

Dh Taravajra

Taravajra@ntlworld.com

A heuristic inquiry into the experience of turning towards difficult experience in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teaching.

Risk assessment and management procedure

In my proposed study, there are two potential areas of risk

The following outlines these risks and how I will manage them

1. Risk of distress to participants

The participants have all been selected for the study because they are experienced and mature teachers of mindfulness-based approaches and are trained counsellors or psychologists. They have therefore participated in training which enables them to approach challenging experience in ways which take care of personal well being. It is not therefore anticipated therefore that the research interview will trigger distress or discomfort beyond that which the participants are experienced in managing. Participants will also have their own support networks in place (as part of their professional life), and will be accustomed to turning to these in times of psychological distress.

However, given that the interview will particularly focus on participants' experience of working with difficulty it is potentially possible that distress may arise. If any distress does arise, I will offer immediate support through empathic listening and will only leave when I consider that the participant is more settled. I will also make my mobile and e mail address available and offer further support if this is helpful.

2. Risk of danger to me

I will be meeting the participants either at their homes, workplaces or at a mutually convenient venue.

I have previously met all the people I plan to interview and trust their integrity.

I have no concerns about my personal safety

Taravajra

October 2009

Appendix D

Interview Questions

The general picture

1. Can you say something about your experience of teaching students the skill of turning towards difficulties as suggested for example in week 5 of the MBCT course?
2. What, in your view, are the benefits of doing this? Are there any drawbacks?
3. Can turning towards difficulties be overemphasized?

The experience of the students

4. How do students get on with this approach?
5. What helps them learn this skill?
6. What prevents students from engaging with this approach?
7. Are there times when avoidance/distraction is a more helpful strategy? How do students learn which approach is best at any particular moment?

Your experience of teaching

8. What helps you to convey this approach of turning towards difficulties?
9. Have you noticed any challenges in this area of teaching?
10. How do you respond to expressions of distress of participants?
11. How does the background idea of the universality of suffering (for example in Buddhism, the teaching of dukkha) inform your approach in this area of being with the difficult?

Your own personal experience of difficulty

12. How do you work with your own difficulties in meditation? These might be physical or emotional, and range from slight to severe

13. How do you engage with difficulties connected with teaching? Do you ever feel you've messed up, had problems with a student, 'failed', felt 'not up to it, not good enough' or that your teaching has become mechanical? Could you say something about how those times have gone for you?
14. Is there anything you'd like to add about how your own practice of mindfulness affects your teaching in this area of turning towards difficulty?

Resources

15. In developing your ability to convey this approach, what resources have you found most helpful?

Appendix E

Individual depiction of the Invitational approach

(Co-researcher F)

that's what helped me personally engage with meditation through Buddhism, initially the fact that people had a strong sense of this is valuable, so they weren't wishy washy ... but at the same time they were saying but it's your choice.

... where along the scale do we work? For me personally and when teaching, it doesn't feel an all or nothing thing, it's about how far to work with difficulty and sit with it and how far maybe to turn away from it in practice and come to something else which could be seen as a form of distraction.

[the skills you're describing, the capacity to include or open to or stay with difficult experience, being on a graded path depending on what you described as ego strength, ... about do I stay with the breath to distract myself or do I breath with the unpleasant experience. These seem ... quite subtle skills and I'm very interested ... in an 8 week period how much of that you can convey to your students ... is it good to turn towards, is it better to distract yourself because that's a very key area?]
My sense of it is almost as long as people leave asking that question, then that's fine. I don't know even for myself that I have an answer to that ... and I think if people can leave with an experience and an understanding that it can be helpful to turn towards the difficult or to stay with the difficult but also at times that can be unhelpful.

there's ... a worry one way of going too far and causing people harm but a worry the other way of not giving people the confidence that they can sit with difficulty, sit with unsatisfaction.

It might not always be the most helpful thing for someone right now to be doing either an MBCT course or turning towards the difficult. It may be that actually what they need is to get away from it.

I think there's all sorts of different ways of working with the difficult and so for example with trauma for example, traumatic stress, the evidence would suggest some of the individual approaches whether it be CBT or EMDR, they have an evidence base, this is a helpful way for people on average to work with trauma whereas mindfulness doesn't have the same evidence base.

MBCT is only one approach ... if I didn't think MBCT was suitable for someone, it's not that I'd ultimately think the underlying principle is unsuitable, it's more this way of teaching it.

when I do groups that involve some form of assessment or even ... just an orientation and sending information out, one of the things I try to be clear about is that some of it will be turning towards challenging and difficult experiences. It's not all about that but some of it is about that and people need to think about whether they're ready to do that now. Of course I don't think people get a full sense of that but my hope is that that screening process does capture some of that, so people even initially are entering it with some decision around that.

Potentially one of the drawbacks, one of the alarm bells I get in assessment is if I get a sense that someone wouldn't choose to turn away from the difficult if it became too much. ... People really need to be in a place where they can give themselves permission not to do something or not to turn towards something.

One of the things that helps is because it could be seen in MBCT as on a sliding scale, so in the first sessions you are sitting with some difficulty, some dissatisfaction but not the same level as in session 5. I think as the sessions go on people have a sense of what the approach is and what it's going to involve and so if it's starting to feel too much for them, either consciously or on maybe an unconscious level, not fully in awareness they can opt not to come along.

... it's then how much to encourage particular people and that session 5 is suggesting more active turning towards and I think although I would say only as much as feels workable,

something like that, the fact that we bring it in, I don't know that people always have so much choice if that makes sense. There have been times, oftentimes if it's a group of people who are experiencing more distress that's for me is when more doubt come up, about is it pushing it too far?

how much can people actually do it once we've said the idea of well, choose something (introducing a difficulty in week 5 meditation), does a big difficulty then pop into people's mind to dwell on, if that what's there but I suppose at least they know they have some choice about whether they actively turn towards that or decide not to.

sometimes I've talked about it (introducing difficulty in week 5 meditation) in advance and sometimes I haven't, but again if it was in the practice I might say in a few moments time, I'm going to invite you to bring your attention to an area of unsatisfactoriness or an area of difficulty in your experience, but really remembering here that we have choice in whether we follow any of the guidance or not and making a decision about what level of unsatisfactoriness it feels ok to be with, so it could be just something of that sort ... so really trying to give people the sense of going in with there's a whole range of things here, it's absolutely fine to choose something at one end of the spectrum, you know.

Appendix F

Individual depiction of embodiment

(Co-researcher E)

The two supporters were aghast that anyone would talk to me like that but I welcomed it, I turned towards it, really welcomed it, it was a genuine thing, I thought this is really juicy stuff, this is biting.

If someone is angry with me ... If I'm the leader of a group I feel my god, they're trusting me, and also ... they want to connect with me, so if they're annoyed about something it feels like a gift. I can genuinely feel like that. The kind of difficulty I find hard is where people say oh this won't work for me, that would be much harder for me, I'd really have to dig deep. I couldn't authentically say immediately 'wow, fantastic'

I can do it with anger, I can do it with difficult behaviour but with something like somebody saying, been there done that, got the t shirt or this won't work for me. Part of me wants to laugh, sometimes that has happened.

There was a woman and ... she was very unpleasant to another group member, she wasn't unpleasant to me ... she kept up this stance all the way through ... I remember feeling it was quite hard to be authentic with her because I couldn't really welcome what she was saying, for me it was just about connecting that I felt annoyed, tight, I felt restricted

[I'm finding it interesting that you're aware of certain kinds of challenge or difficulty that you relish]

Absolutely, love it, they're juicy, I rub my hands, I really welcome

[And they're other kinds, you've mentioned one in particular]

[People doubting whether the process can help them],

If they doubt the process in general I don't have any bother, it's something to do with the particular conceit that they are immune from this particular thing part of me wants to say ... what's so special about you that it's not going to work for you? It seems to challenge something within me, so what I have to do is be, I feel, really patient and just practise patience until I don't feel that. I don't feel angry, I do feel annoyed, it's more like so what's so special about you?

[... It sounds like you're quite aware of that and you're aware you can't really express that so you practise patience]

Practise patience and have a go. That feels appropriate. It's like a holding. That's the kind of intervention I find least easy to do. I feel that I'm not able to welcome that, obviously that's my limitation, I don't consider that to be anything peculiar, I think it's great that I can see that, it's a refined sensibility. I don't find that a challenge, I don't feel I should be any different.

[You don't feel you should be able to welcome everything]

Not yet

[So the fact that you can't welcome something is ok with you]

Absolutely delightful ... if I thought I could welcome everything I'd be a bit superior, I could develop a superiority. But there are areas where I know I need to be a bit cautious

[I imagine that informs how you present welcoming difficulty to other people that you don't present with them with a in some way you should be able to welcome everything, because, like you, there are going to be aspects of life that are difficult to welcome]

I say that explicitly at some point that I wouldn't expect. It usually comes up in the inquiry process, 'no I can't do this', fair enough, that seems to me very reasonable not to be able to do it.

Appendix G

Individual depiction of embodiment

(Co- researcher D)

[This kind of situation in a class, in a group is quite familiar ... I've got the class to run, I've got what I want to do and one of the students is saying I don't like this, or I'm not happy with how this is going. That's familiar to me, how do I address what's happening with this particular person and still maintain my sense of continuity and purpose around the material I want to cover?]

I really recognise that from teaching

So I will have my edge where I can't tolerate any more and there's a bit of nakedness I ought not to show them for their sakes, there's lots of nakedness I don't want to show them for my sake because I don't want to look foolish and be humiliated There's quite a lot of that in me but for their sakes, there is a level beyond which I shouldn't go because they're going to start to feel that this guy doesn't know what he's doing, or that he's going to fall apart

they would all love, wouldn't we all love to be able to say, I feel scared and frightened that I'm going to make a fool of myself because that's our real experience in that moment and ... turning towards the difficulty is within a frame where you're creating ... a place that is nonjudgmental and warm hearted, and that you are genuinely curious and interested in their lives ... people are much more likely to risk their fear of humiliation in a climate like that.

So my instinct is to move towards them because if they're hostile towards me, so because when you used the word distressed I just want to move towards them. That's very familiar to me. I feel open hearted and warm. However it's the person who is bored, challenging or

angry who is more difficult to do that with. People who are experiencing things openly in the realm of fear or distress, as I would call it, sorrow, sadness, remembered difficulties, and that kind of thing I want to move towards them, I want to be engaged, I want to be openly interested. I want them to know that I care. I feel really at home in that. I like it actually, I like it when people get upset.

I love to be moved, emotionally engaged, a strength and a weakness I should think.

I feel at home. I like the blood, sweat and tears really.

[And you feel confident that you'll be able to relate to it in a helpful way?]

Yes I do. And I'm sure it would be easy for me to get complacent or arrogant around that but if you asked me how I feel when I'm confronted by things like that, it's great! This is why I do this

[Bring it on!]

Bring it on! Definitely bring it on.

[lots of things I feel I can show but that one, incompetence, helplessness, lack of expertise in managing distress like that, can I really show that or is that going to be, well if it's like that I'm off, I'll go and find a real teacher ...]

But what I have discovered is, and I know this from other parts of my life, there's a way in which we can say that we don't know and that we don't understand and still not be incompetent in the eyes of others. So I think I can still hold the class and the process while saying, I notice I feel a bit afraid of you when you say that to me.

... where you were feeling something of an achilles heel is about if people get distressed ... and you don't know how to approach them, and so we're all going to have that place

[Tender spots]

Our turning towards the difficulty, our tender spots, just like the class members. We've seen one of mine and one of yours there and of course we're going to bring it always to the class.

Appendix H

Individual depiction of embodiment

Co- researcher C

[How do you deal with your participants getting distressed? You know if someone is in a group and they start crying or start feeling very unhappy or very anxious. How do you work with that?]

... whatever I do at that point is a version of the inquiry process

[That does seem to me a crucial time when the instructor is or isn't moving towards, I remember seeing X at a workshop and we were doing some mindful movement and ... one woman got very distressed and he literally leapt off his chair ... he ended up on his knees in front of this woman holding her hand ... It was a very powerful moment that he had responded in that sort of way, quite visibly he had moved his position and seen it as important and gone to look after her and be with her. I know when I come across people on my courses being distressed I notice myself going 'I don't want this']

Right

[I don't want this going on in my group; I don't want this person getting upset.' I think that's partly not being so confident about how to be with it, not knowing if it's going to be alright or not. That's definitely a teaching edge for me, it's in groups how to be more willing, more prepared. I mean it's not that I ignore people if they're in distress but I notice as well as moving towards them there's also a feeling of oh no!]

I think in a way that's partly inevitable. What comes to the fore for me is myself as a mother. That's my movement really when people are distressed

[Because you've had that training with your children, when they came in and they were distressed?]

... there's that sense that I always feel an instant sympathy and a movement towards but there's also often at the back of your mind, oh goodness how's this going to pan out, what's going to happen now? You're entering the complete unknown at that point, you're outside the manual and just about everything else, and this is another thing that Saki talks about a lot in his book

[He talks about helplessness]

And also there are those times when you yourself are tired, or you're going back to face something or other that is preying, is at the back of your mind, and there's that 'oh not this too'. I think that does definitely happen. What I notice for myself time and again that those times that I run courses when my own personal life is being deeply affected by something, that actually the course deepens and I get a lot of people going very deeply even though they have no idea what's happening for me. Some sort of parallel process or maybe it's just because I'm so in that space at that time

[Because you're more open to your experience perhaps, there's some kind of impact on the group] Because I'm really doing it at that point. When life is going swimmingly, you can talk about turning towards the difficult, you can recall the times when you've done it but it's not actually happening whereas when it's actually happening there's a deep resonance there.

Appendix I

The Guest House by Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.
Barks (1997).

Appendices 4280 words