

Foundation Module Assignment 2: Write a synthesis which integrates your personal experience of mindfulness practice with the rationales which underpin the use of mindfulness as an approach in contemporary settings. May 2011. Word Count 3,491

Whilst explaining to a friend how mindfulness worked in relation to my experience of the world I began to doodle and the resulting in the diagram shown in Figure 1. It occurred to me later that this was a good model with which to synthesis my personal experience and current research in mindfulness-based approaches.

I will start with a didactic description of the model and then hang my personal experiences onto it before discussing its relationship to the models of mindfulness proposed by Z. V. Segal, Williams, & Teasdale (2002) and others. I conclude by looking at the implications of thinking about secular mindfulness in this way.

Didactic Description

Like a map a model is a representation of a more complex reality designed for use in a particular context. This model is intended for discussion of concepts around the secular use of mindfulness and particularly my personal experiences. It is not a general model of psychological processes. It consists of five processes represented by boxes. The five processes are linked by eight relationships shown by arrows. Four principles govern how the model operates.

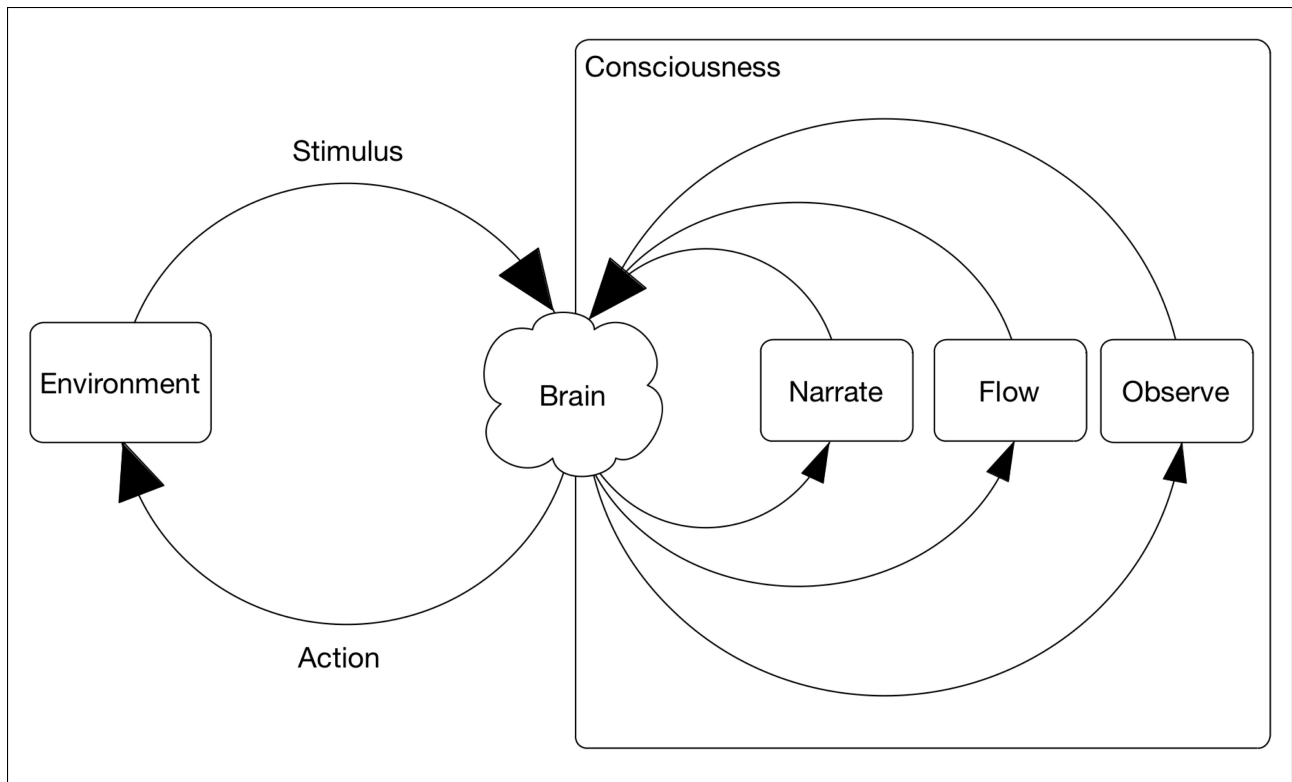
At the centre of the model is the brain. On the left of the diagram is the environment which represents the entire physical world outside the brain including the body. There are two relationships between the environment and the brain. Stimuli in the environment affect the brain and actions instigated by changes in the brain affect the environment. Everything that happens on the left hand side of the model occurs outside consciousness.

The right hand side represents the conscious mind. Consciousness is taken as an emergent property of brain processes. Note that physically consciousness may be thought of as occurring within the brain but, as this is a conceptual model not a physical model, it is drawn outside of the structure i.e. emergent from it. The inputs into the brain come as both stimuli from the environment and as feedback from the processes within consciousness.

The environment only affects consciousness via the brain and consciousness only affects the outside world via the brain. Whether or not consciousness temporally lags behind external reality (Soon, Brass, Heinze, & Haynes, 2008) it must still be preceded by and followed by unconscious

processes. For example, we are not aware of our eyes receiving light only of seeing.

Figure 1: A Personal Model of Mindfulness



Consciousness is modelled as consisting of three processes or modes of mind: narrate; flow and observe. Each mode has two relationships to the brain. Via one they receive information in the form of changes in the brain and via the other they create changes in the brain.

The **narrate** mode is highly concept bound and is principally concerned with language based reasoning. It includes a strong notion of the self as one of the concepts it deals with. When we think through a problem or rehearse a conversation we are in narrate mode. Discomfort is experienced when a narrative does not fit or cannot be altered quickly enough to account for incoming stimuli.

The **flow** mode has a more fluid notion of the world and occurs when we are absorbed in a skilled activity like playing a musical instrument. Flow mode is conditional on the activity. When the guitar string breaks so does the flow. The notion of self is weaker in flow. The musician and the instrument may become one. Flow has been well described in the works of Mihály Csikszentmihályi (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). **The principal way one moves into flow, in the context of mindfulness practice, is to take awareness to sensations arising within the body – often starting with the breath.**

The **observe** mode is the non-conceptual, meta-consciousness of meditation. The meditator may be

aware of the existence of the other two modes but does not judge or categorise them. Notions of self are weak as they are seen as merely one of the conceptual constructs of the mind. **The principal way one moves into observe mode is through openhearted acceptance of what is experienced.**

There are four key principles that govern how the model works.

- 1) According to the notion of a limited-capacity channel we cannot operate 100% in all three modes but have to balance our efforts between them (Z. V. Segal et al., 2002, p. 39; Teasdale, Z. Segal, & Williams, 1995). At one moment our attention may be predominantly focussed in narrate mode whilst at another there may be hardly any narration but a great deal of flow.
- 2) The results of processing information in the three different modes results in different feedback to the brain and different subsequent actions and modes of consciousness. There is a training effect that changes physical structure of the brain (Hölzel et al., 2011).
- 3) Feedback from each mode tends to favour consciousness re-entering that mode. If we spend much time in internal and external discourse our minds are more likely to revert to the narrate mode of consciousness.
- 4) Affective disorders occur as a result of a bias toward narrate mode. Feedback in this mode re-enforces a conceptual model of the world. If we are unable to maintain an adequate model of the world and are also unable to leave the mode in which we are attempting to build that model we become ill. As the self is a central concept within narrate mode evidence of insignificance and death are particularly painful in narrate mode, are of less importance in flow (where a sense of danger is reduced) and are of little consequence in observe mode.

Personal Experience

I first sat in formal meditation around fifteen years ago. As my practice has deepened I have become more aware of not being aware some of the time and of having different modes of mind.

On sitting to meditate I typically start by checking in with my body and my immediate physical experience then moving attention more to my breath and then on to observe the subtler sensations arising in my experience. I see these as the three modes: narrative → flow of physical experience → observation of experience. Often I am interrupted by my attention latching back on to narrative thought for a while. The process then has to be restarted. Sometimes the restart can be quick – just touching gross physically sensation before moving into the clearer space of more subtle sensations.

When I engaged with the eight week MBSR programme and then the Foundation Module I gained new experiences. I had not done so much led meditation before. The body scan was particularly challenging because of the recorded voice guidance. I found I could attach my attention to the guidance voice or to my internal narrative or I could be aware of the sensations in my body but I could not pay whole hearted attention to more than one of them at a time. My attention would flip back and forth like the windscreen wipers on a car.

The course also lead to a more considered approach to extending my practice into daily life. My journey to work is an example. I travel either by bike or on foot. When I walked I find I can develop something of the meta-consciousness I experience in meditation. I can become aware of the sensual nature of walking (a flow experience) and also be aware that I am aware (observe) – though not totally in either mode. In contrast when I cycle in the traffic my attention is very much occupied. It can be exhilarating. I am almost totally in flow mode. If I try to become more conscious that I am conscious I feel fear and wobble.

I work at a keyboard everyday so the action of typing can be automatic. As I type these words I am in narrate mode – concentrating on developing the arguments – the typing is automatic. If I move my attention 'back' so that I become aware of the action of typing I can have a sensation of flow. It is pleasing to feel the action of typing and the words appearing on the screen. When I am copy typing something I can stay in this state. If I move my attention 'back' further to observe what is going on in my experience as a whole then my typing slows and I lose the engagement but I also feel an inner smile arising.

If I am feeling a little depressed or I am becoming anxious then I become aware of the stickiness of the narrative mode. Getting out for a run or some engaging activity – observing my breath – moves me into flow and I feel relief but the effects don't last. If I can go beyond and move into observe mode and ask what is really happening for me (without trying to answer the question) then I feel the effects are more permanent.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)

The modes of mind presented in the diagram were inspired by the model of mindfulness in depressive relapse proposed by Z. V. Segal et al. (2002). The models are similar but there are significant differences. In MBCT two modes of mind are recognised “Doing” mode and “Being” mode and the analogy of changing gear in a car is used for moving between these two modes. We can only be in one gear at a time (page 70).

Doing mode is very similar to the narrate mode proposed here in that it is involved in maintaining a story of how the world is, how it should be and what should or ought to happen to make it that way. Depressive illness is caused by inappropriate cycles of rumination in doing mode. The 'stickiness' of narration (Chodron, 2004) that I feel when I am in low mood. But doing mode, as described by Z. V. Segal et al. (2002, p. 72) differs from narrate mode in that it includes the subconscious 'automatic pilot' aspects of behaviour (page 99).

We may feel anxious and eat another cookie without it even entering our conscious thought. The cookie is not eaten in narrate mode. Only in retrospect will we create a narrative about the action. By contrast, in the MBCT model, the cookie is eaten in the un-mindful doing mode. This is an important distinction. We can only work with what we are conscious of, the narrative not the action, and so a model must have a construct that differentiates between the two. If the long term goal is to cut back on emotional eating we have to make deeper changes in the mind that will prevent the action occurring **before** we are aware of it. In this both models are in agreement.

MBCT being mode appears to include both the modes of flow and observe. For example "being mode is characterised by direct, immediate, intimate experience of the present moment" (Z. V. Segal et al., 2002, p. 72) would well describe a skilled musician performing a piece where there is no meta-consciousness present. They are neither ruminating over how well the performance is going nor are they passively observing it. In one sense they are "decentered" from their thoughts but they are not in a meditative state. They are in flow. On the other hand the core skill of MBCT "involves moving from a focus on content to a focus on process, away from the cognitive therapy's emphasis on changing the content of negative thinking, toward attending to the way all experience is processed" (Z. V. Segal et al., 2002, p. 75) which is nearer observe mode.

Decentering is therefore not entirely synonymous with observe mode as it is defined in terms of leaving the cycle of ruminative thought rather than being purely about observation. It is possible to be conscious of ones actions, not in discursive thought and also not in a state of meta-conscious awareness.

MBCT being mode also includes both concentration and insight (the samatha and vipassana of the Buddhist tradition) with an emphasis on the concentration (Crane, 2008, p. 46).

Conflating these different concepts into a single mode of mind may be useful when the primary goal is to move participants away from unhealthy rumination. There are dangers however. These sub-modes may have very different therapeutic effects and interventions that favour one over the other

may be designed very differently.

Three Axioms

Another formulation of secular mindfulness is proposed by Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman (2006) who posit three interconnected axioms; Intention, Attention and Attitude. Mindfulness is developed by paying attention to ones current experience with the right attitude for a reason (the intention). This leads to a “reperceiving” of ones experience which is a shift in perspective that is beneficial to multiple aspects of wellbeing.

The three axioms and reperceiving map onto the proposed model very well but not one to one. Intention is the narrative that justifies our actions. It is foundational because it sets up what we pay attention to and our attitude to that thing. Attention occurs in flow mode but may or may not be accompanied by an attitude that will lead on to observe mode. Moving on to reperceive depends on 'why' we are paying attention. Reperceiving is what we do in observe mode and could be thought of as synonymous with it.

In short, if an appropriate Intention is present in narrate mode it causes us to pay Attention with the right Attitude in flow mode which moves us into observe mode where we reperceive our experience. Shapiro et al. (2006) specifically state that it is reperceiving that has the therapeutic effect not merely detaching from our discursive thoughts. It is therefore important to recognise reperceiving/observe mode as a distinct from just being present or only decentering from our ruminating internal voice. This equates well with my personal experience.

Attitudinal Foundations of Mindfulness

There are many ways in which we can be moved out of our narrative mode and into flow that are unlikely to lead on to reperceiving in observe mode. Above I mention cycling in heavy traffic but watching an intense drama on TV or riding on roller-coaster are other examples. Stepping out of our experience is harder and, as Shapiro states, attitude is key. Kabat-Zinn (1996) lists a set of attitudinal foundations to mindfulness: Acceptance; Non-judging; Non-striving; Letting Go; Trust; Patience and Beginners Mind. The core of these foundations is Acceptance and the others can be thought of as elaborations or clarifications of this notion. We can only enter observe mode and start reperceiving with **acceptance** of what we are experiencing. If we **judge** some parts of our experience as preferable to others, even at a very subtle level, then we are conceptualising and have slipped out of observe mode towards narrative. **Striving** requires that we separate our current state from our desired state and prefer one over the other. We need to **let go** of requirements for our

happiness, be **patient** and observe what is developing – **trusting** that we will not be harmed. To observe with equanimity requires openness and inclusion of the observer with the observed and this implies warm, open hearted friendliness. To be cool and indifferent requires a dispassionate observer separate from the thing observed – two distinct concepts – and is therefore incompatible with observe mode. We need to be comfortable with the ambiguity of not 'knowing' in the sense of having a narrative explanation of our experience if we are to let go of our self-narration.

Neuroscience

There is no part of the model labeled 'Stress' and yet the primary purpose of mindfulness interventions has been to help with affective disorders which are strongly linked to stress. (Hanson & Mendius, 2009) provide an account of neurological processes in the context of Buddhist practice which illustrates how stress fits within the model.

External stimuli enter the brain and the first part to respond is the hippocampus and amygdala of the limbic system. They set the feeling tone to the experience as either positive, negative or neutral. A more conceptual interpretation of the stimulus centred in the slower prefrontal cortex follows. This conceptual interpretation relies on past experience and our self narrative. If we associate the stimulus with past pain (real or imagined) then we will tense for more pain. The narrative mode will produce more stimuli that escalate the negative mood. If we are vulnerable, destructive ruminative cycles will lead to anxiety and depression. The whole system is biased to react more strongly to threats than opportunities because of the evolutionary weight each carries. A missed threat is more likely to kill you than a missed opportunity. Hanson & Mendius (2009) refer to the brain containing a simulator centred in the upper-middle prefrontal cortex that runs 'movies' that take us out of our current experience. This is thinking in narrative mode.

We have little control over the destructive rumination cycle. We are only aware of the thoughts and our reactions once they have occurred and set the feeling tone for the next thought. We need to train the mind to act with equanimity to incoming stimuli so they don't trigger inappropriate feeling tones in the limbic system. This is what we do through mindfulness practice.

There is an analogy with physical fitness. If we have trained the body well then we can run for a bus. If we haven't trained the body then we can't decide, when we see the bus about to depart, to act **as if** we were fit.

I notice this from my own practice. As it deepens I am less likely to fly off the handle but I still do lose perspective and get upset sometimes. These episodes become shorter and I am less likely catch

a negative mood from someone else but they still occur – automatically. I can't will myself not to have them. I can only patiently train my mind to be the kind of mind that doesn't have them. I do this by sitting in formal meditation and by observing everyday experiences (putting dishes in the cupboard or walking to the shops) with equanimity. The limited-capacity channel dictates that there are times when I am too engaged in acting to be mindful and it is part of the practice to accept this. The Buddha continued to meditated after his enlightenment implying that, even for him, mindfulness in everyday life was not enough.

The importance of the model distinguishing between flow and observe modes is that entering flow mode provides relief but **does not** rewire the brain. Dwelling in observe mode – re-perceiving – **is** therapeutic and changes the brain. This is my central thesis and I believe it is supported by the work of Shapiro et al. (2006) as well as the Buddhist traditions.

Repercussions

The model I have described represents a personal view that has arisen from study and practice. It largely agrees with the accepted, contemporary approaches to mindfulness but there are places where it does not match current practice and these areas may be informative, both from the perspective of deepening personal practice and designing methods of teaching mindfulness.

One issue is the use of words. When we engage with a narrative we can't be in observe mode. Understanding words requires conceptual thought in the prefrontal cortex but observe requires letting go of these concepts. Voice led meditations are key to both the eight week MBSR and MBCT courses. The practitioner is either engages with the voice or their own flow/observe experience – which is ineffable. They can't do both. During Melanie Fennell's presentation to Bangor students in March 2011 she mentioned that regular meditators would find led meditations annoying and this equates strongly with my own experience.

The semi-structured enquiry period immediately after a practice during course sessions may also be counter productive. Participants are invited to put into words their experiences. Even if they choose not to do this they must still listen while others do so. If they have just had an ineffable, re-perceiving of their experience then encouraging them to conceptualise it may reduce its therapeutic effect or encourage them to think they are doing something wrong if they can't put it in words. I certainly found these sessions uncomfortable for this reason.

If the goal is to lead people to a place where they can re-perceive and therefore gain therapeutic effect then I believe silent practice should be introduced as quickly as possible during a course. My

overall conclusion from the foundation module was that although there are many elements I agree with I wouldn't teach mindfulness in quite the same way. I would like to spend some time re-visiting the teaching methods used in the Buddhist traditions and looking more deeply at research in neuroscience.

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