

Foundation Module Assignment 1: A summary of personal reflections on: i) your experience of the process of mindfulness practice, and ii) your experience of engaging in the mindfulness-based programme during the module. March 2011. Word Count: 1,960

I am very conscious that in attempting to make sense of my reflections on practice I am creating a narrative and that the one thing I have learned (if I have learned any 'thing') is that we touch a deeper meaning in our lives only by letting go of story lines. Caroline Brazier summed this up well as “whenever we say anything about the Dharma we always want to take it back as being inadequate or missing the mark” (Brazier 2010 *pers. comm.* in discussions on (Brazier, 2003). It is in this spirit that I present a crystallisation of my reflections on practice.

I have been actively developing mindfulness for nearly twenty years. Only in the last year has this been in the context of MBSR/MBCT. What follows may have a staccato feel as I pull out episodes to try and convey my overall experience.

Mindfulness Before MBSR/MBCT

In my early teens I was a dedicated Christian. At a church summer camp we were taught what I now recognise as *Shavasana* (the corpse pose) from yoga mixed with some gentle progressive muscle relaxation. In many ways this primed me for the future. I left Christianity behind but I carried on using *Shavasana* particularly at night when I couldn't sleep. Feeling the weight and sensations in my limbs whilst my thoughts continued to flow. I remember experimenting with my thought processes and scaring myself when I realised I was a separate observer of my thoughts. An adolescent existential crisis that could have been destructive.

I would have long discussions about life with my father. He introduced me to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1974) and that turned me on to Buddhism. He would often quote A.E. Housman:

“LOVELIEST of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,

It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.”

(Housman, 1896)

This can be read as a call to action, *carpe diem*, to live *for* the moment. But for me it has a different meaning. It is a call to stay *in* the moment and experience it deeply. This can only be done if we **embrace our own impermanence** and Housman helps us do this by poetically binding our lifespan to that of cherry blossom. My father didn't take care of his health and died when he was only sixty two – he never had his threescore years and ten. I was twenty five. Impermanence and our ability for self deception deeply inform my practice.

By the mid 1990's I had a small Buddhist themed bookshelf but was not sitting formally. I went on a meditation course run by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. This was life changing. They taught Mindfulness of Breathing and Metta Bhavana. I started sitting on my own and taking retreats. I was reminded of my adolescent experiences of the separation of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations.

Two memories stay with me. I was sitting at night during heavy rain and the noise on the trees outside was very loud. As I sat things became very much more vivid. I had a powerful sensation of significance and the moment was etched in my mind. On another occasion I was sitting during the day and I had an intense physical sensation as if I had been squeezed through a tight aperture into bright light. I was physically shaking and had to stop for strong sweet tea! On neither of these occasions was I doing anything special I was just letting go and coming to my breath. These experiences and lesser ones coloured my outlook.

In 2000 my first daughter was born and we moved out of town. Away from the support of the Sangha I sat more sporadically. Gradually it became unpleasant. Time and again I would scan through my body and take my attention to my breath but I'd always end up back with the feeling I was wearing a mask I couldn't take off. In 2004 I did a retreat in the Soto Zen tradition – with eyes open. This felt odd after ten years sitting with my eyes closed but within four days my practice had changed gear and I was free of the mask.

On moving back into town in 2006 I began to sit with the Community of Interbeing having been touched by the works of Thich Nhat Hanh. I found I could sit with friends four times a week. I started a class at work. I went on my first solitary. I began to have more frequent physical and emotional experiences that I could describe as rapture or bliss. Sometimes these would come to me away from formal practice. I found I could more readily tune in to my surroundings. Although I find frustration in life it is harder to harbour animosity. I presume this is a result of my practice but can never know for sure. I also notice that sitting sometimes leads to emotional exhaustion but that periods of deep, often dreamless, sleep result in feeling very refreshed almost resurrected.

I had read *Full Catastrophe Living* (Kabat-Zinn, 1996) and when I heard of the course at Bangor I re-read it. After some hesitation I decided that it may be my way forward.

Experiences Arising From MBSR/MBCT

I attended an eight week MBSR course with Avinash Bansode (who is a Bangor student) in Edinburgh. I enjoyed it – particularly meeting people and seeing how some of them gained from the course. It introduced new practices to me but I am uncertain how much it changed my experience compared with how much it gave me a new language for talking about experience – if there is a difference between the two. The eight weeks passed quickly.

About this time we were having difficulties with noisy neighbours. I felt great anger and would lie awake seething over noises my wife couldn't even hear. The discussions around unpleasant events on the course prompted me to bring my practice into these times and I noticed the physical effects. I was more comfortable when I could place a location on the sound. I would feel it on that side of my body. I would be more anxious when I couldn't locate the source. I realised that my anger was rooted in fear. This was something entering my family home over which I had little control. With this realisation the sounds lost much of their power.

Body Scan

I threw myself into the Foundation Module with gusto. The first week of the body scan practice was fine – like part of the eight week course – but then I started falling asleep. I would go out like a light, waking with a start periodically through the next forty minutes. I have many notes about this. I tried reclining in a chair, different recordings or leading myself with just a periodic bell. It wasn't until a break over Christmas that the penny

dropped. I was falling asleep because I was tired. A full time job and young family meant I was practicing first thing in the morning or late at night. Whenever the novelty of a new technique wore off I'd just go to sleep. If I had a day off I could easily do forty five minutes mid morning without sleeping. Before I started the course I was *sitting* regularly at the same times without going to sleep. It was the lying down that did it.

But there was something else bothering me. It was the recorded voice. When I don't fall asleep I can lie and take my awareness to different parts of my body, my breath and my thought processes. I have been doing this in different forms for over thirty years now. But doing it as part of the course involves 'listening' to recorded instructions. At first these can be useful but they soon become a hinderance. My awareness might include the sensation of having a body as a whole, my breath, the focussed part of the body, an echo from the paired part of the body such as the other knee, ruminative thoughts and sensations from my surroundings. Adding to this rich landscape of experience a voice describing how to handle a back pain I don't have for the twentieth time seems incongruous.

In one of his body scan recordings Jon Kabat-Zin says:

“If at any point you need to tune out my voice to find a deeper silence underneath what I am saying then by all means doing so and coming back to the guidance when it feels appropriate” (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007 – accompanying CD, track 2, 3' 30”).

In retrospect I should have taken this advice to heart and turned off the recordings after about ten days and, if I was tired, sat instead of lain down. By following homework instructions and not listening to my own needs I was not acting with mindfulness.

Events Diary

One event from my diary: I am cycling up a steep hill in heavy traffic in the dark, cold and rain. Freshly started engines produce particularly noxious fumes as I pant for breath. I realise this is an unpleasant event for my diary and bring my attention to the moment. At this point I have stopped cursing, stopped my automatic rumination and stepped off the hedonic treadmill – although I am still on my bike. This is a fundamentally pleasant sensation. Any unpleasantness being caused by my sensations of aggression and of blame fall away as I acknowledge them. I am familiar with the physical sensations of this letting go from when it occurs in meditation but can't be sure I experienced any such sensations on my bike. I am confused by the reflective self verses the experiencing self. If I am honest

I can't describe my experience on the bike beyond saying that “waking up” appeared to alter it. As I report my experience to my diary I am aware of frustration at this not fitting in the boxes provided.

Practice in Daily Life

Several times a week I have the opportunity to walk to work. My route takes me across the centre of Edinburgh. This has become a practice for me. I note as my attention comes and goes. Sometimes it is back getting the kids to school. Sometimes it is at work writing an email. Sometimes I am whole heartedly present, walking amongst the buildings, trees and people. The coming back sensation is a cross between a bag being pulled from over my head and remembering something rather amusing – an inner smile. Landmarks become triggers for coming back. I don't force this. They occur naturally. A certain stretch of pavement. A tree. A Wall. Looking around I want to share the experience.

Conclusion

I have had an inner conflict around trusting my own judgement and homework instructions – particularly around the recordings. When sitting meditation was introduced I quickly moved to sitting in silence. The recorded voice seems appropriate for mindful movement but the fact that many of my classmates continue to listen to the recordings as their main form of practice unsettles me. Are they having a radically different experience?

References

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