

CHAPTER 12

Inquiring into Practice
and Practicing Inquiry

In the years since the first edition of this book was published we have been asked many questions about how best to teach MBCT. Some of the most heartfelt and pressing queries focus on “inquiry,” the time, either just after a practice or when home practice is reviewed, when the instructor invites participants to describe, comment, or reflect on their experience. It seems that this is the single area of teaching in which both trainees and more experienced instructors are most likely to express concerns about their skills in implementing the program. Yet it is also an area, potentially, in which participants’ learning can be enriched enormously. For this reason, this might be a good point to pause and examine this aspect of sessions in some detail.

First, as a way to demystify inquiry a little, it may be helpful to point out that we have looked at many examples of inquiry throughout the book already: Wherever we have quoted, verbatim, the ongoing exchanges between instructor and participants, that is the inquiry process in action. We can think of this dialogue as progressing through three concentric circles and layers of inquiry⁹⁰:

1. In Layer 1, the primary focus is on what participants actually *noticed* in their direct experience of the practice—their description of the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations of which they were aware.
2. In Layer 2, the focus is a continuing *dialogue* about the experiences that were noticed. Through skillful questioning and reflection

those experiences are placed in a personal context of understanding.

3. In Layer 3, the emerging characterization of the experiences is *linked* to the ultimate aims of MBCT (preventing depressive relapse and enhancing well-being) by situating it in a wider context of understanding. This wider context allows the learning to be *generalized*, so that it becomes relevant to all participants in the group, and its implications for further action can be explored.

Kolb’s⁹¹ model of adult learning—the “learning circle” (see Figure 12.1)—offers a similar, more dynamic view of the unfolding of experiential learning in the process of inquiry. Inquiry is an ongoing cycle, in which one movement around the circle forms a foundation for the next.

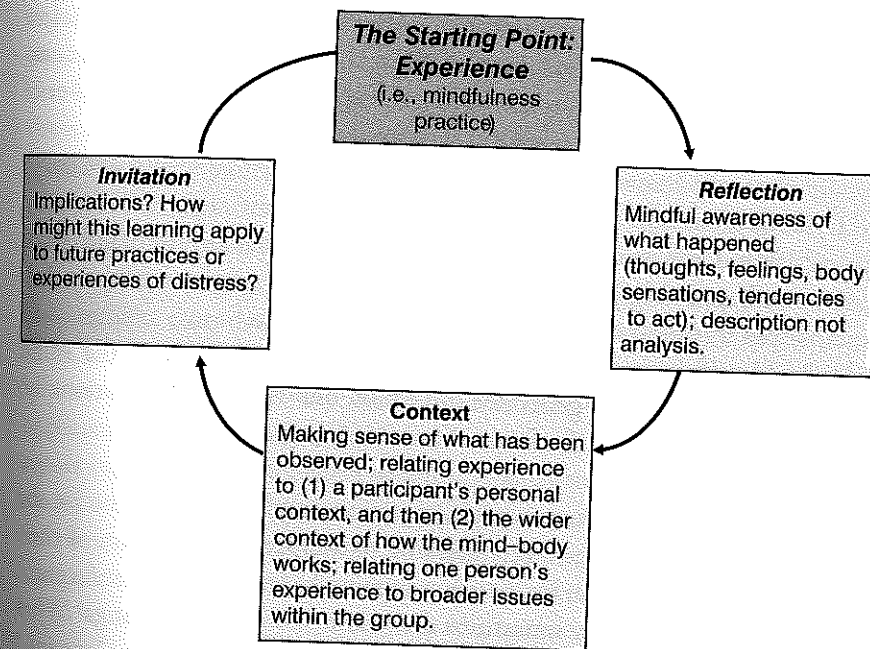


FIGURE 12.1. Kolb's model of adult learning: The learning circle. Kolb, David A., *Experiential Learning: Experience as a Source of Learning and Development*, 1st edition, © 1984. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.

These general, somewhat abstract descriptions of the inquiry process can be helpful in giving some sense of the overall “shape” of this aspect of the program. However, they do not directly address the question that is the real and pressing concern of most aspiring instructors: “How, actually, do I do inquiry?” We will turn to this vital “How?” question shortly. First, we need to inform that discussion by considering the “Why?” question: What are the aims and intentions of inquiry?

INQUIRY: AIMS AND INTENTIONS

Skillful inquiry serves a surprisingly large range of ends within MBCT.

First, it acts *to tune the way participants bring mindful awareness to their experience*. The simple fact that the instructor, through his or her questioning, shows an interest in the details of experience (“Where, exactly, was the sense of contraction in the body most intense?”; “How did it change, if at all, over time?”; “What thoughts and feelings accompanied it?”; “How did you respond to it?”; etc.) itself conveys a number of key messages:

1. Awareness of experience is important.
2. Mindfulness is about cultivating *a sense of knowing*, in detail, what is happening in experience, moment by moment, rather than simply resting the attention in a particular place.
3. Mindfulness includes knowing what is happening in the mind and body more generally (e.g., how one is reacting emotionally) beyond the specific focus of attention (e.g., the breath).

The way the instructor poses questions and the words he or she uses to respond can also subtly reframe participants’ perception of their experience. For example, by focusing separately on the different facets of experience (“What body sensations did you notice? What feelings? What thoughts?”) the instructor can reinforce the “deconstruction” or “parsing” of experience into its separate components, which we mentioned in discussing the Pleasant and Unpleasant Experiences Calendars (Session 2—Handout 6 and Session 3—Handout 5, respectively). Equally, by reflecting back participant statements, such as “I was very angry,” with the alternative wording, such as “So, there were strong feelings of anger around,” the

instructor can implicitly support the move to a less personally identified relationship to emotional experience.

Perhaps even more important, the whole stance toward, or relationship with, experience that the instructor embodies in the inquiry dialogue will be a major factor in helping participants themselves embody a new way of relating to experience. This will be particularly important when unpleasant, frightening, difficult, or overwhelming experiences are the focus of inquiry. The instructor who is genuinely curious, open, present, grounded, and unfazed by whatever arises in the course of inquiry is one of the most powerful vehicles for conveying the implicit message: “This too can be experienced fully, held, and worked with; there is no need to escape, withdraw, or numb out.” More generally, in the inquiry dialogue the instructor offers the embodiment of the potential for a whole new way of being with experience beyond the program, in all of life.

As well as being a crucial influence on how participants relate to their *experience*, the qualities embodied by the instructor during the inquiry process can also be a significant therapeutic influence in a second area—the way participants relate to *themselves*. As we discussed in Chapter 8, there are good reasons to believe that taking part in the 8-week program increases participants’ kindness and compassion toward themselves, and that these changes mediate much of the beneficial effects of MBCT. The fact that these changes can occur in the absence of any specific practices explicitly designed to cultivate kindness suggests that they reflect the implicit, cumulative effects of the program as a whole. Chief among these are the kindness and compassion embodied by the instructor. The inquiry process is probably the main arena in which the instructor has opportunity after opportunity to embody these qualities as participants report experiences they regard as failures, weaknesses, or mistakes, which would ordinarily elicit their harsh self-judgment and self-criticism. For the instructor to embody at such times qualities of respect, warmth, care, and compassion toward participants is a powerful influence in helping them begin to embody these wholesome qualities toward themselves.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Perhaps the most obvious aim of the inquiry process is to elicit information

more generally, and to help them understand and see the significance of those experiences in a new light—in ways that will reduce the risk of future depression and increase their capacity to live more fully and freely.

Novice instructors may be helped by knowing that the first part of inquiry, in which participants describe what they noticed during the class or home practice, is itself a critical aspect of the process. Simply to describe their experience out loud can be enormously helpful both to the participant directly involved and to other members of the group, even before the significance of the experience is uncovered more fully in the process of the inquiry dialogue. *For participants it is an invitation and opportunity to "hear" the actualities of their experience, unencumbered by the overfamiliar views, judgments, or habits that too often obscure the points of contact with their direct experience.* For other group members it can be an extraordinary relief to hear another person describe the same difficulties and painful experiences they encountered themselves, assuming "It's just me and my weakness." Seeing the more universal, shared nature of such experiences in this way is an important factor in developing greater compassion for both the self and others. The dialogue within the group helps participants realize that there are common vulnerabilities experienced by all human beings, such as the tendency to add further layers of suffering to unpleasant experiences through our misguided but well-meaning attempts to get rid of them. Equally, hearing others' positive experiences with practice can also reinspire those who may have become disheartened by their own current difficulties. This can be particularly powerful if the persons describing those experiences themselves have previously described going through difficulties in an earlier part of the program.

When a participant has described his or her experience, what then? Recall that *the core aim of the inquiry process lies in the opportunity it provides for the direct experiential learning of new ways of understanding and seeing experience, the ways in which we create suffering, and the ways in which we can free ourselves from that suffering.*

What does this entail for the instructor? It implies that in the course of the inquiry dialogue, he or she gently facilitates a process of discovery and realization through which the participant comes to an experiential appreciation of the core themes and messages of the program, arising directly from his or her own experience. Skillfully conducted, the inquiry can uncover the significance of experiences that might otherwise pass

unknown and unacknowledged. For example, at some level, most of us know the obvious "fact" that unpleasant experiences do not last forever, but this does not stop us being convinced, when we are in the grip of a negative mind state, that this particular experience is just going to go on and on for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, sensitively exploring with a participant a difficult experience, which in the moment felt as if it would go on forever but actually passed by the end of the practice period, can offer an opportunity for fresh *experiential* learning. Such experientially based insight and understanding into the transitoriness of experience is likely to have much more liberating potential for the future than the corresponding factual knowledge "all unpleasant experiences pass." Similarly, helping a participant actually to "see" within a specific experience the way that ruminating on unpleasant feelings increased unhappiness, whereas redirecting attention to the breath reduced unhappiness, is more likely to loosen the grip of rumination in the future than the factual, conceptual knowledge that rumination is the cause of persistent depressed mood. Noticing what may be missed by the participant means that the instructor is, in one sense, "listening out for" themes such as tendencies to be judgmental but keeping them very much at the back of the mind, and using them to guide inquiry rather than as "points to be made." For example, look again at the inquiry in Session 2 in which some participants say that they have not done their home practice (see p. 153). It might have been easier to go into the ways we find it difficult to make time in our busy lives for practice, but the teacher instead focuses on the negative patterns of thoughts that the experience of not doing the home practice evokes. Here is not a prescription but an exploration. Exploration comes first, and the instructor then adds some words to contextualize or universalize the experience. But note what is contextualized: not the experience of noncompletion of home practice, but the experience of the way we seem to take every opportunity to blame ourselves for "falling short."

HOW TO LEAD INQUIRY: THE EMBODIED QUALITIES

As we have seen, it is the instructor's embodiment of qualities in relating both to the experiences that participants describe and to the participants themselves that is a powerful influence in engendering those same

qualities in group members. More than that, these qualities constitute the essential foundation on which the process of effective inquiry rests. Time and time again, we have noticed that the difference between effective and ineffective inquiry depends not so much on the technical skills with which instructors pose their questions as on the presence of these qualities "in the room." Our impression is that this often is directly related to the depth of personal mindfulness practice of the instructor.

Given the overarching importance of these more general qualities, let us consider them first, before getting down more to the specifics of inquiry.

Genuine, Warm Curiosity and Interest

In the presence of this quality, participants are much more likely to get in touch with and reveal the deeper layers of their experience, and the instructor is much more likely to become aware of, discern, and follow through on the subtler aspects of the experiences being described. It is crucial that the curiosity be both genuine and warm, so in supervision or cosupervision you may want to look out for responses that obscure this genuineness. For example, if we too frequently respond to participants' statements mechanically with the phrase "That's very interesting," then move on to another topic without further comment (inadvertently conveying a *lack* of interest in what has just been described), participants will soon feel unmotivated to share or explore their experience further. Equally, if the interest is genuine but perceived as cool and probing rather than warm and empathic, then participants will be unwilling to risk exposing more sensitive or painful aspects of their experience, and their responses will become diffuse, noncommittal, or evasive.

Not Knowing

Just as in skillful Socratic questioning in cognitive therapy,⁹² the inquiry process in MBCT is one of *guiding discovery* rather than *changing minds*; that is, the instructor's questions reflect an openness to discover, in a joint exploration with the participant, the details, significance, and relevance of an experience *without knowing, in advance, what they will be or how the flow of the inquiry process will unfold*. This contrasts with the changing

minds approach in which the instructor has a preexisting agenda about the point that he or she wishes to make and uses questioning to "steer" the participant toward that preordained conclusion.

Skillful inquiry therefore involves *letting go of expectations and the sense of a need to guide the inquiry process toward a particular outcome*. The only agenda is that of exploring and understanding the participant's experience in the moment. This necessarily involves a willingness to *surrender* any premature sense of a need for closure, and to *trust the process* and *trust emergence*—that more often than not, if one mindfully and wholeheartedly engages in the inquiry process, something useful, and sometimes surprising, will emerge. As instructors, we do not need to *strive for insights* in or for participants. In this process, we discover again and again that *patience and humility* are key allies. Patience reminds us that we can work with experience only as it is right now, not as we might wish it to be; that things can emerge only in their own time. Humility reminds us that participants themselves are the experts, each on his or her own experience. In this spirit, the instructor will sometimes ask participants' *permission* to continue an inquiry. Even when permission is not explicitly asked, the instructor maintains a keen sense of working with participants on particular topics only as long as they feel OK about investigating—at that moment.

The qualities required of instructors in inquiry are summarized in Box 12.1. Why are these qualities difficult for novice instructors to cultivate in inquiry? Because we know that the overarching aim of the inquiry process is to help participants understand and see the significance of their experience in new ways that will free them from depression and enhance their well-being, we can be impatient to "get the message across." It is wholly understandable, therefore, that we might be tempted to ask questions such as "I wonder whether you can see what this experience has to do with preventing depression coming back?" The problem is that such questions immediately trigger a "shift of mode" from an intuitive connection with direct experience, out of which some felt understanding may naturally emerge, to the conceptual mind "getting on the case" to "find the right answer that the instructor has in mind"—much as one might have done at school. This latter may gain us some intellectual knowledge but has little genuinely transformative power. The subtle but crucial distinction between this approach and asking questions that lead participants

BOX 12.1

Instructor Qualities and Attitudes
That Facilitate Inquiry

1. Not knowing—inquiry involves acknowledging to yourself that you don't have all the answers and sometimes even saying this in the group.
2. Curiosity—inquiry involves taking an interest in whatever is being described regardless of valence, and especially the triangle of awareness about thoughts, body sensations, and emotions.
3. Kindness and hospitality—inquiry involves welcoming whatever is present, for example, using attentive and positive nonverbal cues, saying "yes."
4. Embodying the practice—inquiry involves bringing awareness to present-moment experience and not just modeling it.
5. Not fixing—inquiry involves recognizing that solutions are not required when the intention is to foster discovery.
6. Opening the space of dialogue—inquiry involves recognizing possibilities and trusting emergence, for example, "Please say more about that."
7. Asking permission—inquiry involves detecting when a boundary or strong emotion is present and checking in with the participant before proceeding, for example, "May I ask you about that?" or "How is this for you?"
8. Letting go—inquiry involves working with no fixed agenda of where one needs to get to.
9. Asking open-ended questions—inquiry involves maintaining a focus on the participant's experience, for example, "Please say more about that" or "And what happened next?"
10. Humility—inquiry involves recognizing that the other person is the expert on his or her experience, for example, "Did I understand you?" or "I heard you say this—is that correct?"

(cont.)

11. Avoiding attachment to insight—inquiry involves less about "Why do you think this is happening?"—a probe that is more appropriate when providing psychotherapy—and more about "How is this happening?" or "What do you notice about this?"
12. Flexibility and letting go—inquiry involves sometimes choosing to ask follow-up questions and at other times saying "Thank you," then moving on.

quite naturally to a characterization of their experience from which the instructor can, relatively seamlessly, draw out a useful general statement closely linked to direct experience.

HOW TO LEAD INQUIRY: PRACTICAL ISSUES

Let us now look at some very practical issues that might arise in the inquiry.

No Need to Cover Everything

In the context of a 2-hour session of MBCT, the inquiry following a longer, formal practice may take 10–15 minutes, and the inquiry into home practice may be of similar length. If one inquiry takes longer, the other may need to be shorter. This means that many comments made by participants on their experience will not be followed up in any detail by the instructors. Bear in mind that the articulation of what has been experienced is *already* an important process for any individual and a contribution to the class, and that it is perfectly OK for the instructor to thank the participant and let the class fall back into silence to allow someone else to speak. There is no need to expect that all, or even the majority, will speak. This demands a *balancing of individual and group needs*. The instructor balances individual and group processes by drawing out from the particular experiences of an individual the more universal aspects.

Encouraging Expression of Different Experiences

Sometimes it is easy to focus only on difficulties, so that those who have had pleasant experiences find it difficult to speak out. Other times, an inquiry is dominated by pleasant experiences to which others in the class cannot relate. The instructor, alert to this possibility, from time to time asks whether anyone has experienced different reactions and responses to the practice, positive or negative. In this way, the instructor embodies a sense of openhandedness and interest in all experience.

Balancing Delivering the Curriculum and Responding to Whatever Arises in the Group

It is important that as part of their preparation for each session, instructors reacquaint themselves with the aims and intentions for each component of the curriculum. Recall that the MBSR and MBCT programs have deliberately placed particular meditation practices and exercises in particular sessions, so that participants are offered many different possible "gateways" into learning experientially the same fundamental truths: the ways in which we create suffering, and the ways in which we can free ourselves from that suffering. These deliberately unfold in a particular order, session by session. We need to allow the inquiry to reflect and investigate where participants in this class are now—not where the participants in a previous class ended up after 8 weeks. Having prepared well for each session by reminding ourselves of the aims and intentions, it can be helpful to write the session title on the whiteboard as a way to orient the class in a particular way. But then the instructor, with the prepared theme as an "anchor," may also choose to respond appropriately to whatever comes up.

Changing Focus over the Program

Recognizing that the scope of inquiry necessarily changes throughout the program, we see that in the earlier classes, the focus is more on (1) directly observing body sensations, thoughts, impulses (action tendencies), and emotions, and how they are or are not experienced as connected; (2) seeing more clearly the habitual ways we normally relate to these aspects of experience; and (3) recognizing what happens as we bring mindful

awareness to our experience. In later classes there is more emphasis on generalizing what is being learned in formal practice to challenges of day-to-day living, using the breathing space to investigate experience and respond wisely to it.

Trusting What Emerges

Because there are multiple gateways into mindful awareness, the instructor can draw out a learning theme from the actual experience of participants only if he or she allows it to emerge, rather than forcing it. There is a real sense that the clearer the plan for a session, the more confidently an instructor is able to let go of the plan, and trust that the learning that needs to happen will happen. As Jon Kabat-Zinn has remarked, "Whatever is going on in mind and body right now *is* the curriculum," and this is true for each of us in meeting the challenges of daily life and as a teacher meeting the challenges and delights of a mindfulness class.

How to Learn

For a new teacher, there is no substitute for sitting in on a class with an experienced MBCT instructor. In sitting in, it is good to pay particular attention to the ways in which the general characteristics we have mentioned are enacted in moment-to-moment teaching in the class.

Types of Questions Asked in Inquiry

An instructor keeps a balance in the types of questions he or she asks. A skilled instructor:

- Uses open questions (e.g., "What did you notice at that point?") rather than closed questions, which require only a "yes" or "no" answer (e.g., "Did you notice any tensing up in your body?").
- Uses questions and statements that open space for discovery (e.g., "Would you be willing to tell me more?"; "Can you say more about that?") rather than questions or statements that close the space, such as "yes" or "no" questions, fixing, or solution-focused statements (e.g., responding to a statement about an experience of

discomfort in a sitting practice by saying, "Many people feel discomfort when they sit," implying that this "goes with the territory" so there is nothing further to be investigated).

- Asks permission to continue where appropriate, so participants feel safe and are in control of when the process ends (e.g., the teacher may say after one or two questions, "Is it OK to ask some more about that?").
- Gives time to each "layer" of the inquiry (each part of the learning circle).

QUESTIONING THAT CAN BE HELPFUL, "LAYER BY LAYER"*

Step 1. Direct Experiencing

Immediately after a formal practice, or when discussing home practice, the first area of inquiry focuses on the *direct experience* of the practice. There is an emphasis on exploration of physical sensations: Thoughts and emotions are explored in connection with how they interconnect and/or express themselves as sensations. Here are some of the questions often asked at this point (but note that there is no sense of scheduling a particular order of questions or feeling obliged to ask them all).

- "What did you notice?"
 - "Inside your body?"
 - "Physical sensations?"
 - "Emotions/feelings, and sensations connected to them?"
 - "In your mind?"
 - "Thoughts or images?"
 - "About now, the past, the future?"
 - "Where did these take you?"
 - "Outside your body?"
 - "Sounds?"

* We are grateful for discussions and an unpublished 2007 manuscript (J. Mark G. Williams, Catherine Crane, Judith M. Soulsby, Melissa Blacker, Florence Meleo-Meyer, and Robert Stahl, *The Inquiry Process: Aims, Intentions, and Teaching Considerations*) that informed this section, which also draws from Crane.⁹⁰

- "When your mind wandered, where did it go?"
 - "Thoughts (memories, worries, planning, time, food)?"
 - "Body sensations (of restlessness, pain, boredom)?"
 - "Emotions (sad, angry, fearful, happy, secure, loving)?"
- "What was your reaction, if any, to these experiences? How did you relate to them?"

Step 2a. Exploring the Direct "Noticing" within a Personal Context of Understanding

- "How did you *feel* when your mind wandered?"
- "What did you *do* when your mind wandered (let it wander, get involved in the thoughts, bring it back—did you bring it back with gentleness, firmness, guilt, annoyance, amusement, judgment, etc., and what sensations in the body did you notice came with the gentleness/firmness/guilt/annoyance)?"
- "How did bringing awareness to this experience affect it?"
- "Is this pattern of experience that you describe familiar? If so, in what ways?"

Step 2b. Exploring the Integration of Learning in Layers 1 and 2 into a Wider Context of Understanding

Into this dialogue is woven understanding of the potential relationships between these observations of the individual's experience; the effects of bringing mindful awareness to the processes of the mind; and the understandings about the ways that, for example, "depression mind" is triggered and perpetuates itself. This is sometimes a process of facilitating participants in drawing out these connections and at other times offering teaching which supports this integration. Notice how this is done in the inquiry on pages 264 and 266.

Step 3. Invitation to Investigate Further

An inquiry may end (though not always) with an invitation to explore an experience further in home practice or day-to-day life. This may be relatively formal and offered to the whole class (e.g., the invitation to eat one

meal mindfully after the raisin exercise in Session 1, and the invitation to notice moments of autopilot by choosing one routine activity that is usually done on autopilot and see what is noticed when we pay attention to the experience). Or an invitation may be offered to a participant who has commented on particular aspects of mindfulness practice. For example, people who report that when they notice their minds have wandered, always feel that they have failed, may have realized during the inquiry that they do not know what their body feels like at that point. They may be invited to notice, in their home practice, how their bodies react when they discover their minds have wandered and feel they have failed. Notice how the invitation itself can change the spirit of the practice: from that of striving to keep the mind still, to being open to investigate the experience when it is restless. Here a "problem" has been turned into an opportunity. The spirit is one of turning toward any chances to notice that arise—whether mind wandering or anything else—and this "looking out for opportunities" itself conveys a very different attitude to the practice.

Be aware of the edge that is being worked here. The potency of mindfulness-based learning rests on the direct experiential knowing that evolves in participants in its own time. The process of linking this learning with a context of understanding can have the effect of either consolidating and validating this experience or closing things down. It therefore needs to be worked in with skill and sensitivity. As teachers, we remain aware of how much the material for this process is generated by the participants or by the teacher. The experienced teacher allows enough time for the actuality of experience and relationship with experience to be explored before introducing any "learning" elements.

Let us, finally, turn to the inquiries after the raisin practice and body scan as examples to illustrate some of these more general principles.

The instructor poses the first question to the group, asking, "What did you notice about this experience?" or "What did you become aware of during this practice?" and "Would anyone like to comment on their experience?" The intention here is to help participants stay with their direct experience of (in this case) eating the raisin: the reactions in the body, in thoughts and/or feelings. They are helped to see clearly their experience, and perhaps also the sequence of their appearance in the mind-body, then to see what happened in the very next moment—the reactivity that tells us how we are relating to what has come up.

An example might be a participant who reports noticing sensations of sweetness as he or she bit down on a raisin, thinking how lovely this was, then having thoughts about buying raisins as a snack and feeling disappointed that his or her child did not like raisins. The instructor may reflect back what has been said, perhaps asking at what point he or she noticed the mind "going off"—perhaps asking if the mind wandered any further (once it had got into thinking *about* things rather than sensing). At some point, the instructor may gather other similar experiences, then comment, with a lightness of touch, how easily the mind "finds other things to do" when it "thinks it has seen enough" or how easily we get bored, and how the "hurry-up mind" can turn up—how the mind appears to have a mind of its own. Note how the instructor has seamlessly shifted the focus from simple experience to contextualizing or universalizing the experience by reference to *how the mind appears to have a mind of its own*. Here is an implicit invitation for participants to notice this in daily life, and an embodiment of the spirit in which to notice: friendly curiosity rather than harsh judgment.

Similarly, experiences and discoveries about the contrast with the usual way we eat, gathered together, lead naturally to a discussion of the time we spend on autopilot. It is usually not long before someone comments, "This way of eating a raisin is different from how I would ordinarily eat raisins." The question "In what way?" or "Can you say more about that?" may foster reflection on the comparison between doing something mindfully and the more routine or habitual ways we normally engage with the world.

The richness of the scent of the raisin, or its appearance, or its texture, may lead to comments about how slowing things down a little and paying attention can change the nature of our experience in surprising ways—some pleasant and some unpleasant.

Notice what has happened here. The instructor has started with participants' own experiences; invited class members to reflect on it while the experience is still "fresh"; then made full use of the discoveries to contextualize the practice in terms of the themes of Session 1: autopilot; mind wandering as normal, and the way that paying attention—doing one things at a time—can transform the experience in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

More general learning may be alluded to relatively easily, if briefly: how, if we spend time on autopilot our minds may wander, and how, if we pay attention, we may notice the richness of the present moment.

realizing it is happening; or that when we are brooding about something, life passes us by.

Instructors who are relatively new to MBCT—although they find the inquiry somewhat puzzling or even intimidating—say that they have little problem with the inquiry following the raisin practice. So one way to think of any inquiry is to use the raisin as a prototype: experience—reflection—context—invitation.

Let us take another example. If, in Session 2, participants noticed that their breathing felt shallow, then the instructor might ask when they first noticed that, and whether they noticed any reaction to it. At that point, some participants might report that they simply noticed it, then returned to the focus on sensations. Others at that point might report that they found themselves distracted. In either case, there are choice points here. The instructor may ask how long the distraction lasted, and what happened then (asking for more *reflection* on the experience), commenting that the aim at this stage is to notice the mind “going away” and, wherever it has gone, to bring the attention back to the breath. In these cases, the instructor is choosing to stay with the *learning* that each of us needs to do, again and again, that it is in the nature of the mind to wander; it is not a mistake, and it is possible to wake up to this mind wandering, so that we realize we have many more choices about where the mind is, moment to moment. The *invitation* for the next week’s practice—both formal and informal—would then be to see if it is possible to notice how the mind wanders away from where we had intended it to be.

Or, if the instructor chooses and there is sufficient time in the session, he or she may ask participants if they were aware of what had taken them away from the breath—thoughts or feelings (i.e., asking for more *reflection on experience*)? Let us say that the participants comment that they thought that their breath was *too* shallow. The instructor may notice that there is an implicit comparison going on here (“This is not how things should be”). But the instructor noticing this does not mean that anything need be said at this point. It is more helpful to ask: “. . . and then what happened?” Participants may say that they wondered what this might mean: “I thought maybe I was just tense, then I thought it might be the old problem coming back.”

Here is another choice point. It can feel tempting to ask about what the “old problem” is. But recall that this might take the class away from the task in hand, to investigate the actual experience of the mind being distracted by thoughts/images about the past, or worries about the future. So *if* the intention of this inquiry is to focus on the patterns of the mind, then the possible *learning* is about the processes of the mind, not its content: how the mind rapidly cascades from (1) sensations to (2) comparisons with how things should be, to (3) asking “Why?” questions, then (4) to past and future thoughts. And all in an instant that can easily be missed. If this is the learning, then this is where the instructor focuses, for the “content” (e.g., “my old problem”) will differ from individual to individual. Many different issues take different participants away from their intended focus. But *underneath all these differences in content, there are likely to be common features in process*. One of these is that an implicit comparison (“This is not how things should be”) starts a “problem solver” module in the mind that feels very compelling but often takes us down a track that turns out not to be skillful, and may even increase our suffering and distress.

Note that in each case participants may jump to providing a narrative prompted by their experience, and it may be necessary to redirect them gently to stay at the level of process: What sensations, thoughts, and feelings were present? In time, participants learn to see that their reactions and internal experience are actually composed of individual elements of body sensations, thoughts, feelings, and behavioral tendencies. Participants may come to see their automatic tendencies and habits more clearly, and will be helped by hearing from others about common patterns of the doing mode of mind. Class discussion may also reveal the ways in which we all tend to add layers of difficulty to existing problems, anticipate the future, or dwell in the past.

In drawing the discussion together, the instructor may interweave the observations of individual experiences with an understanding of the way that the “ruminative mind” can be triggered and perpetuate itself. Sometimes what is called for is that the instructor facilitate the group itself making these connections, while it might be necessary at other times to offer teaching points that support this integration.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is important to acknowledge that in training and in the early days of teaching, most instructors find inquiry challenging. Simply knowing this can be helpful in allowing any sense of difficulty with this aspect of the MBCT program to be seen more as "this is the way it is for everyone" rather than as some reflection of personal deficiency or failure.

On the other hand, it is just as important to stress that it gets easier with practice—by which we do not just mean that inquiry gets more skillful the more often we do it (which, in general, it does). Rather, we also mean that the instructor's continuing and deepening personal practice of mindfulness is a vital support for teaching this aspect of the MBCT program. It is the instructor's practice that enables him or her to embody the qualities of "being"—openness, presence, steadiness, curiosity, patience, kindness, compassion—even in a situation where, quite literally, one may not know what is going to happen from one moment to the next. The situation in the teaching room mimics the situation in our own daily practice, where we also do not know what is going to arise in the next moment. The spirit that the instructor brings to the inquiry is one of *really wanting to know how things unfolded*. This is not a "put-on" or false curiosity, but a genuine exploration of emerging themes that is important for both participants in the dialogue (teacher and participant) because both can learn from it.