

Foreword

What you have in your hands is an important and finely honed work, the first of its kind, as far as I know — a guide for exploring from the inside and making explicit what is involved in teaching mindfulness to adults in mainstream secular settings within mainstream society. This is a pioneering and courageous breaking of new ground, in part because it explicitly brings together different ways of studying and knowing the world of human experience from the perspectives of the scientific, meditative, and philosophical traditions. The authors provide a great deal of context and substance for developing the rich interior space from which all good teaching emerges, as well as the background and history relevant to the emergence of the growing interest in teaching mindfulness among professionals in health care, education, and beyond. They offer a close examination of the range of skill sets required, and the potential positive effects of this pedagogy associated with the cultivation of mindfulness within the community of a classroom. What I hope to contribute to this offering are a range of perspectives and concerns that are essential, in my view at least, to understanding the great responsibility and challenges of teaching mindfulness, and the great benefits that can emerge for others and for oneself if we can keep certain principles and contexts in mind as we engage in this potentially life-transforming work.

Many Streams, One Ocean

In the year 2000, during a meeting in Dharamsala, India, organized by the Mind and Life Institute, in which the Dalai Lama and a group of psychologists, neuroscientists, scholars, and contemplatives explored together the subject of destructive emotions and what might be done to mitigate the enormous personal and societal harm that so often stems from them, the Dalai Lama, amazingly and yet characteristically, challenged the scientists to come up with non-Buddhist, secular methods for working with and transforming the energies of these said emotions.¹ He acknowledged that Buddhism might have a lot to offer, in terms of its elaborate and detailed understanding of what he termed *afflictive emotions*, including a range of meditative practices that have been utilized for centuries and millennia in monastic settings to

work with them in skillful ways. At the same time, he was saying that the real hope lay in a non-Buddhist, a truly universal and secular approach that would make use of whatever elements of Buddhist understanding and methods were found to be helpful, but only combined with and integrated into Western culture, its understanding of the psyche, and in particular, its scientific understanding of emotions, emotional expression, and emotion regulation.*

It was truly impressive that the Dalai Lama was encouraging such a secular approach. It affirmed the view that it was only by bringing together the epistemologies and practices of the different cultures represented in the dialogue that whatever might develop would be of any use to people in non-Buddhist countries. Out of that meeting came a very strong and ongoing effort to respond to the Dalai Lama's challenge. It has given rise to a range of new approaches, innovations in teaching methods, books, and studies just now being published in the scientific literature, reporting on major efforts to operationalize this secular challenge and the outcomes of these efforts in terms of brain science, psychology, and medicine.

It was also pointed out at that meeting that there already was an approach that had been doing much of what the Dalai Lama was calling for in clinical settings, primarily hospitals, for twenty-one years at that point, namely mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and the family of mindfulness-based interventions that have arisen around it. It was also pointed out and discussed in considerable detail that there was a growing base of evidence from scientific studies that MBSR training resulted in profound effects on medical patients and others in terms of relief of pain and suffering, and also in terms of immune response and specific brain changes related to more effective emotion regulation. Of course, it was well known by many of the participants in that meeting that the curriculum of MBSR and other mindfulness-based interventions is deeply rooted in a universal expression of the *Buddhadharma*[‡]; and that the curriculum features the cultivation of mindfulness of mind states and body states, including in particular, awareness of reactive emotions, as well as how to deploy specific strategies to respond mindfully rather than react reflexively when they are triggered — and even more so if these emotions tend to linger and color one's longer term experience, actions, and relationships, as they so frequently do.

In the emerging of new and compelling fields of inquiry and understanding, in this case the various potential applications of mindfulness in mainstream society, there are usually many different streams of thought and effort that arise more or less simultaneously, sometimes running in parallel, sometimes taking very different directions, but all issuing into the one ocean of what is. All can be said to add value in one way or another to the overall vector of the work because their experience and findings, particularly if the individual efforts have integrity, expand

*This would include supporting the development of new research agendas to investigate our understanding of emotions, including happiness, and those not usually studied in the West, or even seen as emotions, such as kindness and compassion.

[‡]The foundational teachings of the Buddha.

our understanding of what works well under what circumstances, and what doesn't. But, sooner or later, the different streams tend to recognize each other, take stock of each other's virtues and limitations, and finally come together in the emergence of a new and inclusive synthesis, one that does indeed add value to what has come before.

In the context of this book, that synthesis would be the emerging in this era of a new way of understanding the nature of the mind and how it works, grows, and continues learning, its relationship to the new-found plasticity of the brain and to the self-healing body, and, in terms of practical applications, what might be possible in a vast array of different venues in society and its institutions, such as medicine and health care, education, business, sports, economics, and politics, were we to individually and collectively avail ourselves of the depths of these emergent discoveries that shed new light on core dimensions of our true nature as human beings.

Motivation and Integrity

Teaching Mindfulness is a welcome and very timely response to the exponential growth of professional interest in mindfulness and its applications in society, and to the need, now upon us, to scale up the teaching of mindfulness to a much broader level within many of society's institutions, as noted above, in response to the rapidly growing interest and demand. This of course, requires a very large cadre of well-trained and highly competent and skilled mindfulness teachers. One critical challenge that the authors are well aware of is that of maintaining the highest levels of mastery and integrity necessary to insure that there is deep authenticity and fidelity in the teaching of mindfulness. Otherwise, it wouldn't be mindfulness, it wouldn't be dharma, and the effort itself wouldn't be very mindful or tap the vast potential energies that lie at the heart of why people are so drawn to mindfulness in the first place. For mindfulness is not just one more method or technique, akin to other familiar techniques and strategies we may find instrumental and effective in one field or another. It is a way of being, of seeing, of tapping into the full dimensionality of our humanity, and this way has a critical non-instrumental essence inherent in it. From the very first chapter, the authors describe a process and pedagogy that speak to the depths of what the work is, what it asks of those who come to teach it, and what the challenges are for anyone hoping to pursue such a path.

One of those challenges is to examine one's own motivation for embarking on such an unusual path in the first place. Motivation is an ongoing and crucial factor for teaching mindfulness, and even more so, for maintaining, sustaining, and deepening one's practice. It invites continual re-examination and reflection, as motivations can grow and change, and richly mature over time and with experience.

In terms of initial motivations, the authors recognize that the mushrooming professional interest in mindfulness in different arenas carries with it the inevitable risk that for some, becoming a mindfulness teacher is now something of a smart career move. This is not necessarily bad. Actually it is a sign of success that

so many young people, graduate students, medical students, new teachers, are wanting to work in this area, sometimes even introducing mindfulness as a field of professional inquiry to their mentors and advisors. So even if mindfulness is a smart career move for some at this point in time, that is still simply a starting off point on an extended journey, a place to begin, and a profound opportunity to follow one's intuition and ambition into something far deeper than one might suspect at first. It is almost inevitable that one will discover that the trajectory one has embarked upon goes way beyond the concept that mindfulness is merely a technique that one can easily pick up at a workshop or professional training and then integrate into one's repertoire of skills. This challenge will become, whether anticipated or not by those drawn to this work, a central feature of one's effectiveness as a teacher.

The early years of MBSR and the development of other mindfulness-based clinical interventions were the province of a small group of people who gave themselves over to practicing and teaching mindfulness basically out of love, out of passion for the practice, knowingly and happily putting their careers and economic well-being at risk because of that love, usually stemming from deep first-person encounters with the dharma and its meditative practices, often through the mediation of Buddhist teachers and acknowledged masters within a number of well-defined traditions and lineages. For better or for worse, the next generations of mindfulness teachers may not have the same opportunities or even interest in studying and practicing with Asian Buddhist teachers, or Asian teachers in other traditions that value the wisdom of mindfulness, such as Sufism, the yogas, and Taoism. Fortunately, there are ample opportunities, for those who wish to pursue them, to study and practice with Asian teachers and with seasoned Western dharma teachers who have themselves practiced in Asia with respected teachers, and to sit long retreats at wonderful Dharma centers in the West. I personally consider sitting long teacher-led retreats periodically to be an absolute necessity in the developing of one's own meditation practice, understanding, and effectiveness as a teacher. But while sitting periodic long retreats may be necessary, it is not in itself sufficient. Mindfulness in everyday life is the ultimate challenge and practice.

The practice of mindfulness is a life-time's engagement. Growth, development, and maturation as a mindfulness practitioner and teacher of mindfulness are a critical part of the process. It is not always painless. Self-awareness can be very humbling, so the motivation to carry on and face what needs facing must mature as well in the process.

Opportunity and Calling

Why is mindfulness so sought after in this moment, and so necessary? In part, I would say, because the world and its institutions and denizens are literally and metaphorically starving for authentic ways to live and to be and to act in the world. We long for some degree of effective balance and wisdom that supports meaningful, embodied, and significant work — the work of making a difference in the world,

of adding value and beauty, of individually and collectively waking up to the full range of human intelligences and capacities we share for wisdom, ease of being and kindness. Those capacities and intelligences also include a love of learning, the urge to continue growing into our full potential as beings across the lifespan, into our capacity for healing ourselves and society, into becoming agents of healing out of the response of our compassionate hearts, in a word, an aspiration from deep within our bones and cells and DNA for contributing to the flowering of what is deepest and best in ourselves as human beings, as the species name *homo sapiens sapiens* [the species that knows and knows that it knows] suggests. Without this waking up from the endemic unawareness and self-absorption that we are also subject to, our propensity as a species for ignoring what is most important, coupled with our intellectual and technological precocity and tendency to be blinded by our own volatile emotions and desires, may get us and our now small and crowded planet into even greater trouble than it is already in.

If we were to name some of the emergent streams at the moment that are germane to the subject of *Teaching Mindfulness*, the list would include the domains of mind/body medicine, integrative medicine, mindfulness-based clinical interventions of all kinds in health care, medicine, psychology, and psychotherapy, including mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), mindfulness-based relapse prevention for binge drinking (MBRP), mindfulness-based childbirth and parenting (MBCP), mindfulness-based art therapy for cancer patients (MBAT), mindfulness-based eating awareness training (MB-EAT), mindfulness-based trauma therapy (MBTT), mindfulness-based relapse prevention — Women (MBRP-W), mindfulness-based elder care (MBEC), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), mindfulness-based psychotherapy, mindfulness-informed psychotherapy, mindfulness-based mind fitness training (MMFT) in the military, the Shamatha Project, the Contemplative Mind in Society, Google's main campus employee program in mindfulness-based emotional intelligence — Search Inside Yourself (SIY), the emerging fields of contemplative neuroscience and neuro-phenomenology, and perhaps the biggest challenge of all in many ways, the emerging stream of bringing mindfulness into education, especially K-12 education, but also higher education. That is a lot of mindfulness-based work. Of course, this trend implies that we will soon require a lot of mindfulness teachers, a lot more than are presently available. And good ones. It is up to us, individually and collectively, to recognize what that might mean.

This remarkable and ambitious book is a uniquely welcome contribution to the flowering of mindfulness in the West in mainstream professional circles. To date, no other book has even attempted to synthesize the various elements of the MBSR model into a coherent and explicit teaching pedagogy that could serve as a foundation for the skillful development of new teachers, and the ongoing deepening development of experienced teachers of mindfulness in this wholly secular idiom, yet which is wholly based on the non-dual universal dharma that the Dharma within Buddhism is and has always pointed to.... a basic lawfulness in the universe, and in the nature of what we call "the mind" and its behavior. In this context, which can

sound quite daunting, it is important to keep in mind that the Buddha himself was not a Buddhist, and that even the term *Buddhism* was coined by Westerners only several hundred years ago.²

This book has many virtues. One salient example is the explicit emphasis on and fine-structure analysis of the pedagogy of the classroom and the processes of inquiry and dialogue that lie at the heart of good dharma teaching. The emphasis on the group experience is critical, since almost all mindfulness-based approaches work in a class setting with sizable groups of people, whether they be medical patients or children in a kindergarten or high school classroom. The authors address many domains in the field of mindfulness-based interventions that have remained up to this point more implicit than explicit. One is an overview of the historical roots of Western, and particularly North American interest in meditation. Another is the art and the science and the skill set of teaching mindfulness in a professional clinical context.

Every element of the pedagogy offered here, as the authors themselves point out, is potentially subject to debate and reflection, and to be put to the test in practice. What makes a “good enough” mindfulness teacher is something of a lifetime koan[¶], at least I have found it to be so in my own life, and that koan reminds me constantly of how audacious the undertaking is (and how inadequate we all may feel), and yet, how important and priceless it is as well (see section 8).

Fidelity and Innovation in Any Curriculum

One characteristic of the MBSR curriculum that the authors explicitly point out is that it has what they refer to as “integrity.” Where MBSR itself is concerned, and other clinical interventions modeled on it, this integrity needs to be protected, especially in the face of the inevitable impulse on the part of new teachers to improve the curriculum, or add new “modules” to it, or put in their favorite pedagogical material to enrich the program to make it their own. These are all understandable and in some cases, admirable and creative impulses. And in some instances, they work and work well, and are a necessary element of making the teaching your own.

At the same time, because the foundation lies in mindfulness, it also lies in silence, stillness, and spaciousness. For that reason, we need to guard against the

[¶]a koan is a Zen teaching device, like a puzzle in the form of a question or statement or dialogue one attempts to hold in mind during meditation and understand and respond to without responding with the discursive thinking mind, since no response coming out of thought will be authentic and adequate to the circumstances of the moment. An example would be “What am I?” or “Does a dog have Buddha nature?” or “What is Buddha?” Almost any life circumstance could be seen as a koan. You could think of it as “What is this?” or even, “What now?” In every moment, the response might be different. The only requirement is that it be authentic and appropriate, and not come out of dualistic thinking. Responses can be non-verbal.

impulse we might have, especially if we feel uncomfortable with extended silences or uncertain that the participants in the class are “getting” what we want them to “get,” to fill all the empty space in MBSR with extra “stuff.” The emptiness, the “sparseness” of the curriculum is that way for a reason. Without the silence, the stillness, the spaciousness of the non-conceptual, it would merely become a cognitive exercise, no longer speaking to or cultivating the heart of mindfulness, which is practice.

Several MBSR teachers have shared with me over the years that they have tried at times to change the curriculum in one way or another, to add things, or take things out, even the core practices themselves. In the end, they came back to the core structure of MBSR, having found that their changes didn’t work as well as they had thought. One of the reasons they returned to the core curriculum was discovering that, without meaning for it to happen, all the space and feelings of openness and silence had been filled up.

So when teaching MBSR, it is important that it be MBSR and not simply whatever one wants to put in or take out or modify according to one’s liking or feelings of inadequacy under that umbrella. This means that if you don’t feel competent to teach mindful yoga, then you develop that competency through study and practice with good yoga teachers. You don’t bring a yoga expert in to do the yoga, any more than you would bring a breathing expert in to teach the breathing. You don’t throw out the body scan because you think it is too slow, or too threatening to some, but you learn to work skillfully with the body scan in various ways, realizing that it does have the potential to trigger reactions in people with histories of abuse, etc.

One lesson that scientists have learned from evolution is that certain molecular structures within our cells have been conserved and relatively or even highly invariant over time, and across species. An example would be the structure of actin and myosin molecules, which work together to form muscle that is capable of contracting when it needs to contract, and releasing when it needs to release. Another even more elemental example would be the structure of ribosomes and other cellular organelles. Having refined a process and a structure that functioned effectively over unthinkable amounts of time, almost any change in the structure is bound to lead to a diminishment of function. People have said that MBSR may be similar in some ways. It is important to be innovative, and pull on everything the teacher knows and loves, as appropriate. There is a great deal of latitude and space built into the MBSR curriculum for the teacher to bring in himself or herself in critical ways, including, where appropriate, new information and practices. That latitude in creativity is essential for the curriculum to come alive. But at the same time, there is little room in the 8-week MBSR curriculum for putting in more stuff, however interesting or relevant, without sacrificing something perhaps more important.

It is usually more space that is needed, rather than more information or methods or learning modules. What is important is that the structure reflects the depths of the opportunity that mindfulness offers both each individual and the class as a whole. For the teachers, all that comes out of throwing oneself into the practice itself, and trusting the practice and life to be the real teacher.

Thus, the emergence of the pedagogy elaborated in this book will be, as the authors hope and suggest, an ongoing contemplation in its own right regarding what the teaching of mindfulness is all about. While the 8-week format and curriculum of MBSR in the clinical setting may have its own inner logic for conserving the format and not introducing all sorts of extraneous concepts because of the teacher's pet interests, other forms of mindfulness teaching in other contexts will *require* and *demand* just this kind of spontaneous creativity. When developing new and innovative mindfulness programs for new venues, whether it be at Google headquarters, or in stressful workplaces, prisons, the inner city, sports teams, or for bringing mindfulness into elementary and middle schools, it is important to keep in mind that modifications and innovation are absolutely necessary. At the same time, you wouldn't want to lose the essence. In order not to, you have to live inside that essence yourself, and know who you are working with, what the dominant culture and idiom are, what the specific needs of the culture and its community of constituents might be, in a word, the full spectrum of what each teaching opportunity presents you with. Just dealing with the fact that in many venues a high proportion of participants may have known or unknown histories of trauma requires a degree of sensitivity and flexibility that may change how the curriculum is unfolded, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Of course, you may never know the culture you are entering all that well, so a lot of your capacity to innovate effectively will rely, once again, on trust, on your intuition and sensitivity, as well as on your own good will and clarity, and of course, on your practice.

Languaging and Reification

In my own teaching and practice, I try to bring a highly refined ear to the possible uses of the language so that the languaging itself recognizes and points to and embodies the non-dual. Without opening to this dimension of experience, there is no reason for teaching mindfulness, nor for practicing it. Thus the valuable gift of present participles in the English language, what the Buddhist scholar, John Dunne termed, in observing how much care is given to it in MBSR, "the secret heart of the English gerund." Its virtue is that it transcends duality. That is not the case in all languages, but in English, we are blessed with this part of speech, and it can be very effective in the teaching of mindfulness and dharma. For one thing, it can help us to avoid unwittingly falling into the imperative verb form in guiding meditations, as in "breathe in" or "breathe out," which posits an authority (me), telling someone, namely *you*, who I expect to obey this command, what to do. But by saying "breathing in," you the teacher are no longer giving an order, privileging your position over the student's. We are in this together, and the breathing takes care of itself. The only question is, can we be here for it? Is there any awareness of it? For it is never the objects of attention that are the key to mindfulness practice. It is the *attending* itself. In the attending, there need not be any subject reified who is "doing the attending," or "doing the meditating," for that matter.

With a modicum of awareness, we do not need to fall into what amounts to a very strong habit, built right into the language, of identifying ourselves as the seer, the listener, the smeller, the taster, the toucher, the doer, the knower, absolutely separate and distinct from what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, done, or known, as opposed to a more co-creative and co-arising, relational unity. At first, it might seem artificial in the extreme, and certainly the use of present participles can be overdone or mindlessly abused, just like anything else. But, as pointed to over and over again by the authors, there is a profound opportunity in every moment to rest in awareness without falling into separation and a reification of self or other, and disregarding the relationality and interconnectedness that is so fundamental to experience. So, while there is observing, for instance, we do not have to create, or reify, an “observer;” while breathing a “breather;” while thinking a “thinker;” or while meditating, a “meditator.”

Needless to say, from a relative point of view, of course it is *we* who are breathing. It is not somebody else’s breath coming out of our body. It is not somebody else’s checking account that has your name on the checks. We certainly are seeing, we are hearing, etc. But the mystery lies in who we think that “we” or “I” or “me” is. The mystery lies in the personal pronouns, and how much we identify with them without awareness of the reciprocity of relationality, of interconnectedness, and what Thich Nhat Hanh calls *interbeing*. That may be why the Buddha once said that all of his years of teaching could be encapsulated into the one sentence: “Nothing is to be clung to as I, me, or mine.”^{3,4}

One valuable use of the present participle in the English language is that it can leave subject and object indeterminate, unvoiced. This is a new (and very old) kind of experiencing, underneath thought itself, in the domain of being, the domain of the timeless, of knowing without a knower, of pure awareness. This understanding lies at the heart of the pedagogy presented here.

Trust

Donald McCown and Diane Reibel are experienced teachers of mindfulness in various contexts, particularly MBSR and its applications in health care and business. They are very clear to point out that the pedagogy presented here is a beginning, a means rather than an end. It is meant to be exploratory, tentative, and invitational, clay on the wheel, shaped by their own experience and backgrounds, and aimed at getting us as readers and teachers or possible teachers of mindfulness in secular settings to think and talk together about how we see and work with the challenges of bringing mindfulness in various ways into different contexts and settings. The invitation is to enter into a conversation, to share approaches and perspectives, to reflect together on skillful means for igniting passionate engagement in people, whatever the context, for being more present in their own lives, and for understanding the value of consistent practice and cultivation of embodied mindfulness. They are explicit about this being a collective inquiry,

dialogue, and investigation within the community of mindfulness teachers, as well as an occasion to reflect deeply within oneself as to one's motivation for doing this work or for being drawn to it as a professional, one's relationship to one's own practice of mindfulness and the never-ending learning curve it entails, and to situate one's own understanding within a much broader historical and social perspective that we sometimes shy away from or frankly ignore. It also asks us to reflect on the synergies of practicing and teaching mindfulness in the context of a gathering of people, specifically in a classroom, where the potential for maximizing attunement within oneself and among the group, what the authors term "intersubjective resonance," based on the work of Ed Tronick, Daniel Siegel, and others in attachment theory and interpersonal neurobiology⁵, is profound and enormously valuable.

Importantly, such resonances are not something one attempts to bring into being. That would be a tantamount to forcing or seeking a particular effect, and thus, an attachment to a particular outcome. The desire to bring about an effect is a trap that, if one falls into it, belies one's understanding of mindfulness and the work in the first place, and potentially betrays it as well as yourself and your students, at least for that moment. Of course, we all have fallen into that trap at one moment or another, and hopefully, we learn from such moments as we grow into becoming good-enough teachers. But if we can anticipate and appreciate the potential of such impulses arising, notice them when they do, and resist filling the space with one's own thoughts, anxiety, and agenda-driven aims, that noticing itself allows for the ultimately mysterious emerging of such intra- and inter-subjective resonances within the container of stillness, silence, and awareness in the room.

For this to have even a chance to unfold, trust is paramount. Trust in the practice, trust in the silence, in the spaciousness of awareness that does not have to be filled with anything, trust in a moment that does not have to give rise to anything else, or be described, trust in the beauty of each person in the room as they are. This is one of the many many reasons why we frequently say, as a sort of short-hand, that, when it comes right down to it, *the teaching has to come out of one's practice*. There is simply no other way. Therefore, exquisite intimacy with one's own mind states, including those invariable impulses that *do* want to fill any empty space, that *are* very much attached to preconceived outcomes that are favorable to one's aims and philosophy or ego, is essential.

And you who take on this challenge, or will, or have, will know or come to know that you are probably the greatest beneficiary of your own teaching, practice, and study, more than anybody you teach no matter how much they benefit from it. And you will realize that your students, whoever they are, whatever the context, whatever the chosen mindfulness-based vehicle you are working within, are teaching you at least as much as you are teaching them, until you come to realize that it is life itself that is the only teacher of any note here, life itself that is both the curriculum, the path, and the end of any path, right here, in the present moment, in the circumstances and context we have chosen to walk into and stand within, wherever and however that might be.

Lineage

To stand within such human potential for learning, growing, connecting, healing, transformation, realization, liberation, however you want to frame it, usually requires some sense of lineage. How did you arrive at this spot, in this moment, carrying the message of awareness, of mindfulness, of presence, allowing yourself to be a catalyst in its dissemination to others? Chances are, it wasn't totally by yourself. In all likelihood it has resulted from a journey, perhaps an inner one, perhaps since childhood, perhaps it has come as a transmission from someone else, a gift of sorts, a structure, a curriculum, or the opportunity and necessity to craft a curriculum of your own out of sometimes very trying and often unfamiliar circumstances. Here is another place where your recognition of your personal journey, your path, your teachers, what Yeats called "the unknown instructors," is so essential. Sometimes, you have to answer, when the question is posed: "What tradition do you teach in?"

It happened to me in an unanticipated moment, in Shenzhen, China in 2004, when I was visiting a Chan temple along with some friends, Helen Ma and Rosalie Kwong, who teach MBSR in Hong Kong.

Venerable Ben Huan, a sparkling-eyed 98 year-old Chinese Chan master, after MBSR had been explained to him by one of his senior monks and Dharma successors [the Venerable Hin Hung, who had read and studied the literature on mindfulness-based applications in medicine and health care and was bringing similar principles into both psychotherapy and the education of children, and so was equipped to explain it accurately], commented: "There are an infinite number of ways in which people suffer; therefore there must be an infinite number of ways in which the Dharma is made available to them."

He said this looking straight at me. When it was translated by Hin Hung, I realized that this old Chan Master was giving me and the other teachers in the room a tremendous gift by saying such a thing, by according such a profound recognition and acceptance to another dharma vehicle, potentially suspect, of course, from half-way round the world, that he could easily have felt might be inauthentic.

Then, totally unexpectedly, in his very next utterance, he asked, "What tradition do you teach in?" He clearly wanted to push this foreigner a bit and in a friendly way, "test his understanding," as is the way of Chan and Zen, by probing with a bit of dialogue, with what is sometimes called *dharma combat*. In such exchanges, it is not so much the specific response to a question in words that is critical, but *how* one responds to the challenge it throws out.

I responded, "I teach in the tradition of the Buddha and of Hui Neng*." It was an attempt to be authentic while at the same time, giving him a reference frame that he would recognize and understand. He came right back with "What's the primary point?" I smiled and replied, "Why non-attachment, of course," at which point he

* The sixth Patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism (638-713 AD).

said, “Would you like to become my student?” I smiled again, leaned in close to him, and said, “I thought I already was your student.” He laughed and said, “Let’s go eat lunch.”

All this is to say that you cannot worry about being “enlightened” or “a realized being” if you aspire to be an MBSR teacher, or an MBCT teacher, or any other kind of mindfulness-based instructor. But what you very much do need to take care of — and not worry about — is tending to, deepening, and nurturing in every possible way, many of which may be unconventional and untraditional, your own meditation practice. This might include exposure to and studying with great teachers in the various Buddhist traditions and lineages: *Theravada*, *Mahayana*, and *Vajrayana* to whatever degree possible. Because if mindfulness-based interventions have anything profound, healing, and transformational to offer the world, it is only because they are firmly grounded in the Dharma — not so much as expressed in the particular cultural and religious forms of the Buddhadharmas — but as *universal dharma*, which it is up to us to understand, realize for ourselves (clearly a life-time’s engagement), find ways to language, and share authentically with others without idealizing any of it. Matter-of-fact is the way to go.

I answered Ben Huan as I did in that moment. In another place, or at another time, or under different circumstances, I might have answered very differently. The answer itself is not important, but one’s open awareness of the question and where it is coming from *is* very important. There is never one right answer, just as there is no one right way to practice. This is one small way in which we have to shoulder responsibility for our own work, situating it honestly within our own practice, our own understanding, our own lineage, learning from everything that arises for us in our lives, in our searching for right livelihood, in our professional calling and fields of expertise, and certainly in our desire to be a mindfulness teacher. Not knowing is preferable to too much knowing. But when we are on the spot, any spot, we will need to respond, and respond authentically. Our students require it. The curriculum requires it. Your very integrity requires it.

At the same time, the dharma is very forgiving. If you make a mis-take, as we all have done countless times, if you regret something you did, or said, or forgot to do, or didn’t say, the very next moment, or week, provides amply opportunities for correcting, adjusting, apologizing, whatever feels appropriate. This work is not about being perfect, whatever that might mean. It is very much about being human, and about learning as we, like everybody else, get caught by our own unawareness, our own fears, our own feelings of inadequacy, whatever it might be in a particular moment when we feel we do not measure up to our own standards and expectations, or those of others we admire. These too, are opportunities, precious ones: for mindfulness, for practicing what we may too often be preaching as good for others, forgetting that we will always be the greatest beneficiary of our own teaching, and experience, because it really isn’t *ours*, it just is what it is. It is hard not to take things personally, especially when we feel we have made a serious mistake, but taking personally what is not personal might be the biggest, and the most recalcitrant mis-take of all.

The koan of “What is good-enough teaching.”

No one ever said it was easy to be a mindfulness teacher, or practitioner. In many ways, it is the hardest work in the world, just to be present for a moment, and open-hearted. That is why it might just be worthy of our energy and commitment. We need to be grounded in our own practice and trust that it will be adequate when we most need it, and have to act out of it *without thinking* but with that other core capacity we have, the only one capable of containing and taming thoughts and emotions, namely *awareness*.

Competency in teaching mindfulness within secular mindfulness-based frameworks is a combination of knowing and not knowing. It helps to know from the inside, through your bones and skin, the general framework of the Dharma, including the Four Noble (Ennobling) Truths, the Eight-Fold Noble Path, something of the Abhidharma, stories of certain teachers and teaching stories, and perhaps the teaching lineage of at least one Buddhist tradition. But *not* for the purpose of teaching any of it, or to tell any of those stories. Only to use it in a wordless way, to inform yourself, remind yourself about the meaning of practice, and of key elements embedded in our experience, such as *anicca*, *anatta*, *dukkha*, the *kelesas*, the four foundations of mindfulness, the four immeasurables (Brama Viharas — loving kindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity), etc.

Also, it might be essential for you to participate in various professional training programs in mindfulness and its myriad applications, offered by a number of centers in various parts of the world. These are listed in the Appendix of this book. All are the product of an intensive commitment to the practice on the part of the founders and staff, coupled with unique perspectives on professionalism and skillful means for training people to do the work of teaching mindfulness in different professional settings and fields. The one I know best is the one offered by the Oasis Institute for Mindfulness-Based Professional Education and Innovation of The Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (CFM) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where MBSR originated. Oasis offers teacher certification in MBSR, and a range of professional training programs in mindfulness and divers specific applications throughout the world.⁶

Hopefully you will become intimate over time with classroom moments of not knowing what to do, what to say, who your students are, and what or who you are, and yet be willing to sit/stand/be/move in the not-knowing and reside in the present moment in full awareness — with an agenda (since you are the teacher) and with *no* agenda (since you are the teacher), and no attachment to any outcome, yet with the intention to be of service and the aspiration that everybody’s suffering in the room will be honored and held in awareness, without any attempt to fix anything that you think might be broken. The invitation for yourself is that you are, together with all the classroom participants (who are equally as wise and beautiful and worthy as yourself), co-creating or “enacting” or “allowing” the mindfulness-based curriculum to emerge, and trusting in that emergence moment by moment as you rest in awareness — an awareness that is intrinsically boundless, spacious, luminous, empty, and kind.

So a question we might address to ourselves, and which *Teaching Mindfulness* will help us in exploring, comes down to “What is good enough?” What is good enough in terms of preparation for teaching, beyond all the essential planning and thought that may need to go into a class? What is good enough in terms of the quality of one’s own mindfulness practice? What is good enough in terms of the teachers you have trained with, and the books you have or haven’t read, or the retreats you have or haven’t sat? What is good enough in terms of your presence in the classroom? In terms of your comfort with silence and stillness? Or lack thereof?

Here are a few offerings from my experience, although the only authentic responses will be those of your own heart:

It is “good enough” *for now* if you don’t contribute to or exacerbate the harm and suffering others are experiencing, or become aware that you are and alter your approach and even apologize when you inadvertently do.

It is “good enough” *for now* if you know you don’t really know what you are doing but somehow find a way to be real within the container of the MBSR curriculum or other curriculum you are facilitating in support of mindfulness, and bring it to life in the face of life unfolding and expressing itself in the human beings you are working with, and in yourself, of course.

It is “good enough” *for now* if you carefully drink in what is being offered in this book and take it to heart as you develop your own unique strengths and skills and questions as a meditation teacher and mindfulness instructor.

It is “good enough” *for now* if you keep in mind at all times that life is the real meditation teacher, and life is the real meditation practice.

It is “good enough” if you can remember from time to time, especially when you forget, that nothing you think is personal is personal, so it is best not to take things personally, including your own performance, since it is not a performance but an exchange, a gift, a love affair.

Then you just might make a very big and beneficial difference in some people’s lives, and in your own.

Jon Kabat-Zinn
September 18, 2009

Endnotes

1. Goleman, Daniel *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?*, Bantam Books, NY, 2003.
2. Batchelor, Stephen *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture*, Parallax Press, Berkeley CA, 1994, Chapter 14.
3. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu *The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: The Buddha’s Teachings on Voidness, Wisdom*, Boston, 1994, pp 15–17.
4. Goldstein, Joseph *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2002, pg 134.
5. Siegel, Daniel *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being*, WW Norton, NY, 2007.
6. See <http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/oasis/index.aspx>