

The beauty we love: MBSR teacher education going forward

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The paper begins with a brief overview of the current field of mindfulness and MBSR. Following this, the paper identifies and details nine domains of MBSR teacher education to consider going forward.

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“Let the beauty we love be, what we do.” [1**]

Forty years in the making

Four decades into MBSR and four decades into the digital era, mindfulness is everywhere. Mindfulness programs and Apps are ubiquitous. The commodification of mindfulness is in full swing [2*]. In parallel, publications decry the denaturing of mindfulness spurred by this global mindfulness impulse [3,4]. The latter issues are valid and concerning. Equally true, people are hungering for wakefulness and awareness. Following their deepest longings, they are seeking out places to learn and practice mindfulness that are accessible because they are culturally familiar. Places where science is respected. Places where their faith tradition, if they have one, isn't challenged. Places where teachers' and participants' racial and gender identities match and new forms of colonialism are not being fostered.

When I retired as executive director of the CFM and director of the Stress Reduction Clinic in 2017, our clinic had accommodated nearly 250,000 patient visits in our eight-week MBSR program. This is good news. If one site can engage with and transmit the essence of mindfulness to so many human beings, it means that many other MBSR sites can do the same. As it now stands, the sincere motivation and practice of the overwhelming majority of

MBSR teachers have opened gateways to mindfulness practice on six continents—gateways previously closed or only open to a very select few. Guiding teachers located within sectarian dharma centers across many traditions have expressed gratitude for this unfolding. Many people practicing in these centers began meditation and yoga practice via MBSR and other non-sectarian mindfulness-based programs. In turn, we are grateful to these dharma centers for welcoming and supporting a new generation of practitioners and for the synergies taking place among traditional and contemporary places of practice.

Equally heartening are the efforts of colleagues around the world who have established MBSR teacher education schools. We need more of these schools exploring diverse educational approaches while remaining firmly grounded in mindfulness practice and committed to *transmitting* the essence of MBSR to their students. The growing number of these MBSR centers and schools might be likened to what the forest ecologist, Suzanne Simard, refers to as ‘hub trees’ [5**]. In the forest, hub or ‘Mother’ trees help nourish and sustain the local biosphere through underground fungal networks that support newer, smaller or weaker trees so they can survive and, hopefully, thrive. In turn, these smaller or younger trees send nourishment back to the hub trees when its health is threatened or when in need of specific nutrients. Researched by Simard and her colleagues for thirty years, the science suggests that trees interact and build alliances within and across species through these networks. Such interdependence builds a healthy, sustainable forest. The same may be the case for schools of MBSR teacher education.

MBSR teacher education going forward

So, how shall we develop a new generation of MBSR teachers? I don't have ready answers to this question. I do have some ideas about what might be helpful and some potential pitfalls to watch out for with renewed vigor.

Teaching MBSR is subversive

Since the ‘affairs of human beings’ is what politics is about, mindfulness is political. Relying on inquiry, it poses questions rather than providing easy answers. The inquisitiveness, truth seeking, and freedom that are the hallmarks of inquiry constitute, at heart, a conversation about ‘the affairs of human beings.’ Therefore, while the MBSR curriculum serves an important instrumental function, the quality and depth of inquiry is central.

The centrality of dialogue and inquiry also makes teaching MBSR dangerous. Dangerous because teaching

MBSR will *undo* you as the teacher. The tables will be turned. All your ideas and assumptions about who and what you are, who and what your students are, what it means to teach, and who the teacher is and is not will become the central objects of inquiry about *you*! And, of course, this is the point. But you have to have the belly and the heart for such revelation. Should you persist in your intention to teach, it helps a lot to have or cultivate a sense of humor because what you'll discover about yourself will make you cry, feel incompetent or depressed. Or maybe it will break your heart open and help you realize that you and everyone else on this planet is working as hard as they can to make their way and recapture their innate sense of nobility and that this is all very messy and beautiful.

Dangerous, too, because mindfulness is democratic, locating power and authority in the hands of human beings rather than institutions. The 'power systems' in which we teach will feel this dangerousness [6^{••}]. Each of us is teaching within systems, be they hospitals, universities and clinics or within the broader institutions that comprise society. These systems are always attempting to define the role and scope of education. And, in the case of MBSR, what role learning meditation and mindfulness plays in human health and wellbeing. While these systems might not be able to articulate this sense of dangerousness, something will keep them on edge. They will feel some subliminal sense of threat. Maybe it is because you are placing people and the recognition of their innate resources at the center of your work rather than power, technology or institutional notoriety.

Whatever the reason, as a consequence, they often resist in subtle and not so subtle ways. Mostly, they resist via subtraction. They will give you less. Their support will be meagerly. They will try to make you feel that they are doing you a favor and that you owe them something. And you will have to face this resistance. You will have to learn to work around it, and with it. You might even learn how to lean into it or turn it to your and their mutual benefit. Then, sometimes, usually after a long time, a 'turn' occurs. The system wants what you have. Mostly, they don't quite know what that is but they want 'it' anyway. If this happens, great awareness on our parts is required. There are many inherent possibilities in such moments: they may represent recognition of what you have been working toward for years. Maybe, too, because the people who comprise the system long for the same things you and all your MBSR participants long for, this represents a genuine opening and willingness to support your efforts. Sometimes, when this happens, things do change.

Of course, this may just be another way the institution consolidates power. I am not being cynical, just sober. While challenging, ascertaining both institutional and personal motivation becomes essential in such situations.

Generally speaking, until institutions become less driven by accumulation and self-interest and less enamored with maintaining their self-identities, you too must be sober and clear-eyed. If you are teaching mindfulness your relationship with these systems will always be, to some degree, an act of subversion because what you are teaching is, by its very nature, anathema to maintaining the status quo of any system. Knowing this is important. It encourages us to remember, 'Teaching is a subversive activity' [7^{••}].

Inclusion: a matter of consciousness and conscience

I recently taught a program for MBSR and MBCT teachers and student teachers attended by one hundred people. Among those participants there were three people of color. I find this deeply disturbing. I hope that you do too. If, within the mindfulness and MBSR communities, we declare wisdom and compassion our values then we have no choice but to dig deeply into the well of our hearts and begin investigating the personal, interpersonal, and societal roots of this particular form of alienation and suffering. On this front, I am most grateful for the commitment and human and financial resources many dharma communities across a broad range of contemplative traditions are pouring into facing into and hopefully altering this situation.

Traveling around the world, it has become clear to me that our blindness and deep conditioning around race, ethnicity, age, gender, religious faith and sexual orientation are not a purely 'American problem.' A great migration is sweeping the planet, drawing together people that have never being in such close company before. Our willingness to affirm this comingling and address these issues is the plaiting of consciousness and conscience. Awareness in service of humanity compels us to ask hard questions of ourselves and amplify our efforts to create more diverse, inclusive MBSR teacher education programs. Remedying this is a necessity not a luxury. To begin, let's make 'not knowing' and uncertainty operational realities. Let's seek help from our diverse sisters and brothers. Let's ask for *their* wisdom, *their* insights, and *their* creativity in the domains of curriculum content, language, and pedagogy so that together we can create MBSR teacher education programs that reflect these cultures and values. This is the hard work of confronting suffering, our own and others, and unmasking the many ways that bias insinuates itself into our lives, causing us to lose sight of the inherent beauty of our multiplicity and common humanity. Our willingness to join together in this communal quest is nothing less than the true face of mindfulness in the world.

Networking

I was a full participant in conceptualizing and launching, *CommonGood*—the CFM's MBSR affiliate network. Members paid to affiliate. While such affiliation structures are common, they are inherently unsustainable.

Free from a host of institutional and relational pressures, I'd like to suggest that we now move from payment to payment-free cooperative networks. This would be one way of embodying egalitarianism and altering, at least within mindfulness-based networks, the prevailing power, authority, and economics. One potential model is the network elegance of forest ecology:

'The architecture of biological networks often follows one of three models: Regular, random, or scale-free. In both regular and random networks, links tend to be distributed equally among nodes, but the topology of regular networks is generally more cliquish and harder to traverse than that of random networks. In scale-free networks, some nodes (i.e. hubs) are highly linked and more central to the network, resulting in a skewed node degree distribution. Scale-free networks are both cliquish and easily traversed, and tend to have a 'small world property,' where most nodes can be accessed from every other node by a small number of hops or steps (i.e. small path length). They also tend to be more robust to perturbations than regular or random networks. For example, random deletion of a node would usually have little effect on the overall connectivity of the network, unless hubs were specifically targeted for removal.' [8•]

Examining the *CommonGood* network in light of the above description, it included some of the attributes of a 'regular' network. Yet, as a network, it lacked 'small world property.' Even if an MBSR site was doing good work, the cost of membership limited potential links to the hub node (CFM), thereby shutting other 'nodes' out of network. While this never felt quite right to us, our commitment to formalizing our relationship with longtime colleagues building MBSR centers was an overriding motivation for us to begin. Now it seems important to create networks that enhance the attributes of 'robustness to perturbation' and 'overall connectivity' scale-free networks exhibit. Such networks would 1) minimize the power differential between nodes, 2) increase robustness when multiple nodes encounter financial and other institutional perturbations and are forced to restructure or, for a time, hunker down and survive, 3) enhance connectivity by furthering inclusivity, and 4) encourage networking dynamism.

The vitality of the inner life and the realm of the heart

MBSR teaching comes out of the bones and blood and lived experience of teachers. Good MBSR teaching expresses and reflects the depth of the teacher's meditation practice coupled with their capacity to transmit the essential elements of mindfulness to others. The latter is a craft unto itself. Ultimately, the teacher, and not the curriculum, is the primary vehicle through which mindfulness comes alive and is transmitted to program participants.

I am speaking here about *embodiment*. This then means that the inner life of teachers and student teachers is the ground to be cultivated if we hope to develop a vital corps of MBSR teachers. This takes time because intimacy, maturation, and depth are the sources of embodiment. It is also risky because it requires teachers to be *seen* and, therefore, to be vulnerable. In essence, if we are intending to teach, we must become endlessly willing to study the self—the subjective, phenomenological reality of being alive. Therefore, both daily meditation practice and ongoing participation in intensive retreats are a life-span necessity for people intent on being MBSR teachers. In my estimation, these expectations should not be compromised one whit when educating, certifying and continuing the lifespan education of MBSR teachers.

Four decades into the adventure of integrating mindfulness and MBSR into mainstream society, makes resoundingly clear to me that the most vital teacher quality is the cultivation of the heart and the discovery within each of us that:

... "There have been hearts that have been exposed to fire for a long, long time, and there comes a sulfury water from them, purifying and healing; for it has gone through fire, it has gone through suffering, and, therefore, it heals those who suffer. There are hearts with many different qualities, like water with different chemical substances: those who have suffered, those to whom life has taught patience, those who have contemplated. They all represent one or other kind of the water that heals, and so do their personalities. People who have deep appreciation of any kind, of suffering, of agony, of love, of hate, of solitude, of association, of success, of failure, all have a particular quality, a quality that has special use for others. And when a person realizes this, he will come to the conclusion that whatever has been their life's destiny, his heart has prepared a chemical substance through sorrow and pain, through joy or through pleasure, a chemical substance that is intended for a certain purpose, for the use of humanity, and that he can only give it out if he can keep his heart awakened and open." [Underline mine] [9••]

Balancing the non-instrumental and instrumental

The American educator, Parker Palmer reminds us that "technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives." He is speaking here about the time and space required for the "real" teacher within us to emerge. Technique is a hallmark of training. Education and training differ considerably and are complimentary. Much has been written about this topic so for the purposes of this paper I will be brief [10•,11,12••]. Training is instrumental; it is oriented toward the development of

measurable skills competency. According to this definition, most of what we call education is actually training. Education is wider and deeper. More inward, it awakens us to the essential via direct experience, a kind of ‘in your bones’ learning that is revelatory rather than additive. While skills-enhancing training is necessary and important, I caution against overemphasizing the ‘training’ dimension that often occurs when delivery of content becomes the primary focus of the teacher education. An overemphasis on the instrumental dimension of MBSR may result in competent technicians. What are really needed are educators who embody the vital life of mindfulness enfolded in their realization of the non-instrumental domain of being.

Depth rather than speed

Over reliance on digital platforms, instantaneous information gathering, and the misapprehension of information for knowledge has made speed an overarching criterion of value. Similarly, many people intending to become MBSR teachers want to move through the educational pathway as quickly as possible. I encourage MBSR schools of teacher education to slow down the process, choosing to go depth and refinement rather than speed. This was the public position Oasis took. This cost us potential students. Nevertheless, we remained committed to this view that included the integration of intensive retreats into the basic structure of our educational process. I am concerned that there seems to be growing trend to deemphasize these retreat requirements either to reduce the cost of teacher education or minimize barriers to admission. Our experience within Oasis was that these silent retreats served as essential prerequisites before entering the different phases of teacher education and/or as inflexion points in an ever-deepening, multi-year process of study, practice teaching, and certification.

More mentoring

Teachers and student teachers need a lot of mentoring. At every stage of development, student teachers would benefit from closer and longer-term mentoring with senior MBSR teachers. With great regularity, either live or via video recording, student teachers need to be observed when teaching. Feedback from these sessions needs to be detailed and followed over time to aid student teachers in recognizing their strengths and weaknesses as they learn to trust and teach from their depth. While demanding in terms of time and financial resources, mentoring constitutes one aspect of an invaluable learning environment aimed at maximizing the positive results an effective MBSR teacher can have on the lives of hundreds or even thousands of people they may work with in their courses.

Disrupting patterns

During the seventeen years I served as executive director of the CFM, we dismantled our teacher education

curriculum three times. Likewise, we regularly modified or replaced elements of the teacher education pathway. We did not disrupt simply for the sake of disruption. Rather, the intention was always to serve our students better because we were continually learning how to improve the process and because, over time, patterns become problematic. Soon enough what was once fresh becomes fossilized. Invariably, this leads to biases – individual, collective and institutional blind spots – that dampen creativity and inhibit emergence. When this happens what was initially an original response to an emergent moment becomes rigid and codified. This is the death knell, stifling new expressions of genius.

Lifespan learning and the life of the community

An increasing number of MBSR teacher education centers report that it is difficult to remain in close contact with the people they have educated after their students have completed their formal course of study. Yet, even in the best of circumstances, the completion of formal study heralds the *beginning* of the real work of being an MBSR teacher. Maturation is a lifetime’s work. The development of comprehensive and cohesive lifespan learning programs that offer a measure of required and elective study occurring within a highly committed community of peers and guiding mentor teachers is invaluable for the ongoing development of teachers. I encourage MBSR schools to network as a means of creating robust and nourishing continuing education programs for MBSR teachers.

Coming full circle

The most powerful force in the universe is love. Love begets harmony. Harmony begets beauty. There is such beauty in the world. To be touched by it, we have to see and feel beauty. We have to begin to know it intimately and then give it away. Then, bowing deeply to the source of beauty, everything will begin to reveal its beauty to you. Then, you’ll begin to know the beauty of all the people you’ll ever serve in your MBSR courses, and see through them a glimpse of your beauty. Then, quietly, without fanfare, the ‘beauty you love will be what you do.’

Conflicts of intereststatement

Nothing declared.

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