

Chapter 4

Interpersonal Practices: A Transformational Force in the MBIs

Florence Meleo-Meyer

MBSR participants begin the program primarily as strangers. Over time, they become a vibrant community that discovers together each one's uniqueness, commonality, and potential for transformation. As one participant stated: "This class is more than stress reduction—this class is about being human! And there are not many learning situations like this."

This skillful engagement with one's own life is known as *participatory medicine* (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). It involves accessing innate resources to share the responsibility of supporting health and wellness in concert with one's healthcare provider. The program requires a commitment from participants to engage fully and wholeheartedly by attending each of the eight classes and practicing meditation daily. The group develops a sense of mutuality, intimacy, and support as they return to class weekly and share experiences and questions from engaging with their mindfulness meditation practices in class and at home.

After the orientation meeting, participants appear for the first MBSR class and meet the members of their group. They will all become co-learners for the next 8 weeks. After reviewing the underlying intention, structure, and guidelines of the MBSR program and experiencing "the raisin exercise" (a mindfulness practice that offers a direct and normalizing experience of paying attention with intention and curiosity), participants are invited to introduce themselves. Sitting most often in a circle, the group members share in a council-like fashion, one by one, the unique reason each has chosen to take this class. Individuals express stories of loss, dissatisfaction, resistance, suffering, illness, and medical and emotional, as well as curiosity, intentions, and hope to participate in creating a better quality of life. Individual stories often revolve around self-worth, aging, family, relationships,

F. Meleo-Meyer, M.S., M.A. (✉)

Train-the-Trainer Program, Oasis Institute for Mindfulness-based Professional Education and Training, Center for Mindfulness, University of Massachusetts Medical School, 38 Dragon Hill Road, Shelburne Falls, MA 01370, USA
e-mail: florence.meyer@umassmed.edu

changes with work, finances, and expectations. People talk about what life once was—and what it could be. As each person shares, participants listen with interest and, in the listening, begin to identify similarities to their own reasons for attending. They often enter the program feeling isolated and strongly identifying with their suffering. By the end of the course, many have cultivated more skillful ways to relate to their problems, gaining a sense that all people have a share of suffering as well as the innate capacity to be awake with life's sunshine and shadows.

Often, with the launch of the first class, there is a budding sense of empowerment simply from having shown up. Each person has made the choice to engage in a life training that involves practicing mindfulness with others who are similarly willing to engage in this venture. As such, the MBSR class participants join and co-create a proactive learning community. They are each willing to take on the discipline needed to mobilize innate capacities of awareness and compassion in order to engage more fully and skillfully in life's unfolding. Over the next 8 weeks, with continuing development of formal and informal meditation practices and dialogue, this learning community will progressively and synergistically become a supportive and powerful source of personal transformation.

MBSR is essentially about intimacy and relationship. As participants engage with meditation practices, their innate capacity for awareness is highlighted as they become more deeply familiar with the conditions that contribute to the moment-to-moment experience of life. This shift includes becoming more sensitive to acknowledging bodily cues and developing more fluency in the sensory language of the body. Through their awareness of thoughts and emotions, participants become more alert to the constrictive and, at times, destructive effects of strong identification with opinions, feelings, assumptions, habits, judgments, assessments, conceptualizations, and projections.

The primary quality and style in the teaching of MBSR is dialogic with a particular emphasis on the evocation and exploration of participants' experiences and reflections as a result of engaging with formal and informal meditation practices. The MBSR teacher's engaged interest and curiosity encourage participants to "look again" at their experiences and possibly gain insight into the ways they relate to their daily lives. Focus is on the *process* of the experience rather than the content or history. Several sources influence this methodology, including Zen koans, Socratic, and Bohmian dialogue, as well as practices from Judaism, Christianity, and Sufism. Through a mindful dialogue with classmates or inquiry with the teacher, the MBSR participants receive affirmation about their individual practices and also may be challenged about old self-limiting opinions of themselves and their pasts. Following each in-class meditation practice, there is time in small and large groups to share experiences and to ask questions. These periods of dialogue and inquiry allow integration of the meditation experience through clarifying questions and exploration of the shared realities that come with being alive. Intrinsic to the essence of MBSR is potential wondering about, and investigation into, being human and waking to natural capacities of openness, warmth, and presence. Indeed, after completing the MBSR program, one participant reported saying, "I am not worried about stress now, but I have another question: 'Who Am I?'" This question points to the deepest level of being rather than the surface of personality or the closed system of self.

Deepening curiosity in relation to one's direct experience through the practice of mindfulness and engaging in the mutuality of practice with classmates can support

inner and outer attunement. The possibility of expanding this sense of attunement from self to others, to direct moments of experience, may emerge as the experience and definition of self becomes less a rigid narrative than an emergent process. Joanna Macy writes about the potential “to be awakened by all things” in this way:

The way we define and delimit the self is arbitrary. We can place it between our ears and have it looking out from our eyes, or we can widen it to include the air we breathe, or at other moments we can cast its boundaries farther to include the oxygen-giving trees and plankton, our external lungs, and beyond them the web of life in which they are sustained. (Macy, 2007)

Boldly put, the heart of the MBSR experience cultivates and reveals love: love for oneself, love for others, love as one’s core presence, and love in relationship with all life. All of the sources of wisdom that underpin the philosophy of MBSR are expressions of love. They penetrate the form and delivery intrinsically while not being explicitly or overtly taught. Being made aware of choices creates a foundation for authoring one’s own life and claiming innate sovereignty. Choosing to inhabit one’s life fully through times, filled either with challenges or awesome beauty, means choosing to steer one’s life in beneficial ways.

The intensive and rigorous training in mindfulness meditation cultivates access to what is already present as innate awareness, insight, intuitive intelligence, and compassion. It also builds bridges to one’s common humanity and, in so doing, widens an individual’s sense of self as being larger than previously known, allowed, or experienced. Maya Angelou expresses this definition of love: “By love I mean that the condition in the human spirit so profound, it encourages us to develop courage and build bridges, and then to trust those bridges and cross the bridges in attempts to reach other human beings (Angelou, 2014).”

Intimacy, Intention, and Independence

The experience of engaging in the MBSR program calls forth a strong intention from the individual, which is held in the context of a group. While one enters the MBSR class with others, it is only as an individual that one can make a commitment to fully engage, to be a learner, and to be proactive about one’s health and quality of life. It is the individual who will choose to attend class, who will develop the discipline and take time each day to practice, who will be curious about identifying and possibly challenging automatic, habitual patterns of reactivity, and who will look deeply at what nourishes and creates value in life. It is only the individual who will choose a way to live with more clarity, skill, and kindness. It is a personal journey toward making wise choices that leads to living with greater sovereignty. A paradox is that individual development of intimacy with the direct, present experience of being alive has the potential to ripple and extend to others. In the shared experience, there lies inspiration to witness the journeys of others on the same path.

In the first MBSR class, the group reflects and reports on their individual intentions to participate. The teacher poses a central question: “What brings you here?” There are many ways that this process may unfold. Some teachers guide a reflection using an image that allows the question to deepen. At times, the contemplation may be framed

as if one were following the question like a stone falling deeper into a well: “What brings me here? What is it I want or hope from taking this class?” As the stone drops deeper, more subtlety may emerge. Some teachers support this deepening process with a repetition of the same question: “What really, really brings me here?” The question allows for one’s innate wisdom to emerge with a response that is individually true.

Embedded in the reflection and inquiry are a number of values: each individual has a source of wisdom that can be tapped; the approach is nonjudgmental and the process of deeper curiosity is invited. Answers to the question may arrive as words, images, bodily sensations, and/or nothing specific. With this first inquiry, key attitudes of mindfulness are evoked: beginner’s mind, nonjudging, patience, non-striving, acceptance, and trust. And, in the shared experience, there is the inspiration to hear the multiplicity and familiarity of what drew others to this program.

Often people will report their reflections in layers, saying:

“When I first heard the question, I heard myself say, ‘because I am stressed!’”

“I have a challenging situation with my daughter and I am angry all the time.”

“I was just diagnosed with cancer. I need to help myself.”

Then the question came a second time.

“I have been living by the side of the stream, and I don’t want to come to the end of my life and feel I missed being fully here.”

“I need guidance on how to connect better with myself.”

“I saw an image of a tree; it seemed steady... I want to be more like that.”

And the third time? “I felt in my whole body, a shiver that I don’t know who I am and I want to find out.”

“The third time, I just was silent, still.”

“I was surprised to hear myself say, ‘I want to be happy.’”

The motivations that bring participants to an MBSR class are as unique as each individual in the circumference of the circle. Honoring the life narratives and the stories that have motivated attendance is essential. It is the launch pad for further investigation. As each participant is invited to share the reason for choosing to attend the MBSR class, all listen attentively. Life stories filled with challenges and inequities unfold in the space of the circle. In the speaking and listening, the group supports the individual with a collective intention to participate in this MBSR process. This learning contract affirms one’s willingness to be a participant in one’s own health and to make a genuine effort to fully engage with the program.

Intimacy, Intention, and Interdependence

“It’s better for everybody when it gets better for everybody.”

Eleanor Roosevelt (Albion, 2013)

It is an individual choice to participate in the MBSR program, and it takes individual intention to show up for all classes as well as to initiate and maintain a daily practice. However, the individual’s learning is embedded in the structure and context of

a group. Individuals who are mostly strangers to one another are united weekly with the unfolding development of the program. It is here that the group itself becomes an essential element of the learning process. Understanding is deepened and extended as individuals pose questions and share experiences.

This process is particularly evident as participants share experiences about their implementation of meditation practices in class and at home, waking up to automatic, habitual patterns of reactivity, gaining a fresh view, and choosing new options to respond to conditioned circumstances. One voice is likely to express the experience of several, and the “group process” becomes a deep well of collective wisdom from which all can draw. As one person embraces the discipline of daily practice and shares her/his learning, others might be inspired to amplify their own weaker resolve.

The program invites and cultivates awareness of one’s relationship to all the facets of life. The small blessings and gifts in daily life that may have been formerly taken for granted now become recognized and appreciated. Investigation into stress reactivity and response invites a deep engagement with how one perceives and relates to challenges, whether in health, work, and/or relationships. The MBSR program is a crucible; along with the meditation practice, discipline building, and class themes, the relational and group dynamics contribute to the heat that can lead to transformation.

Stories move in circles.

They don’t go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles.

*There are stories inside stories and stories between stories,
and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as
finding your way home.*

And part of the finding is the getting lost.

*And when you’re lost, you start to look around
and to listen.*

Deena Metzger (1992)

On the most basic level of human organization, we are relational creatures. The structures of the body and brain are designed with relational elements (Siegel, 2007). Human survival once closely depended on the presence, care, protection, and support of others. Earliest people gathered in nuclear families, extended families, and kinship communities in order to procure food, maintain warmth and safety, and share bounty. Humans could not have survived alone, and we continue to have exquisite sensitivity to each other. Human beings are finely attuned to subtle messages. Just a glance offers significant information. A grimace, turn of the head, raise of an eyebrow, and a sideway look all carry potential meanings.

Relationships resonate with the complexity of earlier influences and conditioning. There are many well-worn grooves of patterns and behaviors with those closest and most familiar, such as family members and work colleagues. Below the surface of any interaction may be tremendous activity, indicating complex feelings and associations. Feelings of ease, connection, fear, and wanting may drive the tenor of an exchange but often are not conscious. As mindfulness deepens and strengthens through the MBSR program, patterns that drive reactivity begin to be known.

The Buddha identified the source of reactive patterns as profoundly deep desires or cravings (Walpole, 1959). The word *tanha* in Pali is translated as “hunger,” signifying an urgency to fulfill an impulse that is profoundly evocative and deep, as if one had been hungry or thirsty for days and urgently fixated on quelling the need for food or water. The hungers identified by the Buddha are for sensual pleasure, to exist, and not to exist. These cravings may also be understood as interpersonal: the hunger for pleasure in relationship and the urge to escape loneliness, the hunger to be seen and to know that one exists, and the hunger not to be seen and to escape intimacy or engagement with others. It seems natural to enjoy social contact and to feel the pleasure of company with others and to enjoy being appreciated and recognized. It seems natural as well to savor solitude and silence. The interpersonal hungers point to urges that are profoundly deep and compulsive. They are organized around escape. The very essence of stress reactivity is present with the urges to flee or to fight. When the hungers are very activated, stress increases. When this hunger emerges interpersonally, other people become objects to alleviate the press of the wanting. In this storm of tension and desire, other people are not appreciated for who they are as unique and whole beings, but as a means to escape what is directly experienced and is uncomfortable.

Mindfulness allows one to work more skillfully with the suffering that comes with intense resistance to the way life is right now. While these forces and patterns are always going on without awareness, it is possible to wake up to this pulling away from life. Practice with others allows mindfulness to be cultivated both inwardly and outwardly, and being a member of a learning community sets the stage for sharpening this possibility.

Awareness is progressively developed through the MBSR classes, beginning with awareness of the bodily sensations, what is perceived as pleasant and unpleasant, and then of thoughts and emotions. With this initial foundation, awareness of social patterns of how one gets caught in difficult conversations or relationships can be more clearly seen. Recognizing reactivity and stuck patterns is the key to gradual release and opening to more freedom—if even to a small degree. Stepping back from identifications with... shyness, cleverness, being inarticulate or not interesting, taking too much space, not being good with others...can provide powerful moments of greater ease in the presence of long-held frozen and fixed grooves of self-perception.

The class establishes the practice of mindfulness in and throughout the dialogue and group sharing, and the naturalness of meditation practice is established. The potential for challenging old patterns and embracing new ways of being may then be supported in the presence of one another. When people choose to be awake together and offer to infuse discussion with mindfulness and kindness, it builds mutual support to be awake. The interconnectivity can blossom into an easing of the suffering that intrinsically rises with the sense of being separate. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes: “To be is to inter-be. You cannot just *be* by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing (Thich Nhat, 2012).” In the shared space of mutual practice, a sense of oneness can arise, and with it a sense of sacredness as wholeness meeting wholeness. Martin Buber refers to this presence as a movement from I-It to I-Thou (Buber, 1970).

Relational Practices in MBSR

Throughout the MBSR program, mindfulness is invited into all moments of one's life and strengthened with formal and informal meditations. Intrapersonal and interpersonal mindfulness is engaged in all classes. While the value of sharing experiences is recognized and employed throughout the entire program, the experience of self and other is the highlight of class 6. The specific exploration of awareness in relationship is featured after weeks of cultivating greater regularity and stability with meditation. It follows the investigation of habitual, automatic stress reactivity (class 4) and mindfulness-mediated stress response (class 5). From this base of understanding, the class is invited to explore internal and external communication, stress, longing, and development of greater ease. There are several practices, exercises, and reflections which create pathways of deeper understanding. Below are a few used in classes at the University of Massachusetts Medical School Center for Mindfulness. Each teacher needs to employ flexibility in choosing what methods serve the needs of the group.

1. *Listening: A Body Awareness Practice*

This MBSR group reflection reveals the shared human sense of suffering that comes with feeling separate and the possible ease of longing when being met, listened to, and seen.

The class is invited to stand and establish the *mountain pose*. Feet are firmly connected with the solid base below; the body is aligned, hips over feet, shoulders over the hips, and shoulder blades gently flattened.

The invitation is offered to balance the neck and head, allowing the arms and hands to rest at the sides of the torso. While participants are breathing and sensing the grounded and upright, stable, and elevated posture, a reflection is introduced:

“Call to mind a time in your life when you had something you longed to share with another. This might be a joyful news, something confusing, or troubling. There was a feeling of wanting to connect and be heard. For whatever reason, the person you chose would not be present for and with you. Perhaps they were busy, or not interested, or threatened by your request. With this memory recalled, allow your body to express the way this felt for you. Let yourself exaggerate.”

People often collapse with this invitation; as a group, the upright mountain posture collapses into looking down, folding hands and arms over the chest, and bending forward.

Holding this posture, they are asked to name any thoughts that have emerged from this experience. They might say: “Why don't you listen to me?” “I must not be important to you.” “This hurts.” “Why did I even try?” “I am angry.” “I am not loved.”

Still holding the pose and reflection, they are asked to name emotions that may be present. Sadness, grief, anger, hopelessness, despair, frustration, and self-blame are voiced. At this time, the group is invited to return to the mountain pose and bring

awareness to the feeling of moving from the contracted posture to full, upright standing. Many literally shake their bodies as if to shake off an unwanted presence.

A second phase of the reflection is offered:

“Now, recall a time when you had something you longed to share and someone was there for you. They might have been busy, but they paused and focused on you. They gave you full attention.”

The invitation to express this memory physically is repeated. At this time, the group often reaches arms high; chests are open and exposed. Some people tenderly place hands over their hearts. With the request for thoughts to be named, the room fills with: “Thank you.” “I am so grateful.” “I matter.” “You care about me.” “Finally!” “I am loved.” They name emotions that include safety, gratitude, relief, comfort, refuge, and love.

I have seen this reflection repeat in the very same pattern in groups of different sizes across the world. Almost always, with this reflection of being offered attention, someone will say: “I am loved.”

It is essential to state that every one of us has played both of these roles at different times in our lives. Unbeknown to us, we may have hurt another in a moment of distraction, self-involvement, or sheer insensitivity. At the same time, we have generously offered another attention and care, even at times when it was not always easy to do.

But something universal is established in this group reflection. We all have the power to gift ourselves with deep listening and to offer this gift to another. Witnessing the power and collective agreement with this practice is stunning. From this shared experience, the invitation to practice mindful dialogue has a base of common ground regarding the human longing to connect, to be seen, and to be heard. This sensitivity can then be strengthened in the dialogue practice.

2. Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Patterns and Practices

Through formal and informal practice, pleasant and unpleasant experiences continue to be investigated in group dialogue. The class participants often report increased sensitivity to their abilities to identify impulses of pulling away with aversion, rushing toward with grasping, clinging, and, at times, sensing neither. “I could feel my body tense when I read an upsetting email.” “I wanted to run and felt scared. I paused and really felt it. It was hard, but it started to ease up, a bit.” “I felt the warmth and thought.” “I want this to stay just like this...I wish this wouldn’t end.” “I see how much I feel bored...I just tune out. I see how much real-time life I am missing!”

These insights lead naturally to an investigation of emotional, cognitive, sensory, and behavioral patterns of passive, aggressive, and assertive modalities. The intention of these physical practices is to engage the class in an experiential contempla-

tion of habitual ways of meeting challenges. The intention is to clarify—not to judge one modality as better than another. In unique situations, each has utility and skill that can lead to wise action.

Each activity is led as a meditation, as well as a learning rubric, that highlights the possibility of engaging experience with wisdom. Passive, aggressive, and assertive communication patterns are investigated as ways of separating or being with experience internally and externally. Following each activity, the group engages in a discussion highlighting one's perception of threat, the thoughts, emotions, and body postures that automatically accompany that perception and the possibility to pause, turn toward with awareness, and respond with wisdom. The MBSR teacher might find these practices a useful way of encouraging participants to both embody and reflect upon their dominant styles and explore what it *feels like* to deliberately embody styles with which they are all too familiar, or that are foreign to their experiences.

Practice: Sculpting

Passive

- The participants are invited:
 - Into the mountain pose while standing in a circle.
 - To allow the body to express a posture of passivity.
 - To identify what was noticed? What is noticed with the hands, face, posture, and gaze? Any feelings or thoughts? Responses are called out.
 - To listen as the teacher reads some key features of passivity:
 - “Allows others to choose for them; value self below others; slumped, leaning body language; possible feelings of fear and hurt.”
 - “I will only survive if I have other's approval.”

The teacher acknowledges that there are times when choosing to step back or not act may be for reasons of safety. If a dangerous situation can be avoided, this response may be most skillful. A woman once asked: “Is it possible to be a doormat all one's life?” The teacher asked her, “How does this question relate to your life?” She responded that in her years working as a bank teller, she had been a victim of three bank robberies. When asked if she might share more, she said as a young child she had learned to avoid conflict by backing away. This way of coping had served her to keep as safe as she could as a child with little power in a home with an abusive parent. As she grew, though, she met most situations by emotionally disengaging and allowing others to make choices for her. As she worked in therapy on the trauma from the robberies, the older pattern of avoidance and self-negation rose in awareness. Engaging with these patterns physically allowed greater connection with the felt sense of the early patterns. She began to open to the possibility of exploring more assertive behaviors.

- The group is invited to return to the mountain pose and feel the transition. Inquiry and group discussion follow.

Aggressive

- The exploration of aggressive behavior follows the same pattern of naming details of the body posture, identifying thoughts and emotions, and expressing these in the group.
- Aggressive behavior is highlighted, with the balanced perspective that it can be a wise use of power, like the force of a spring flower pushing up through the earth to the sunlight.
- Participants are invited to physically feel and express aggressiveness and listen to the reading of some key features:
 - Chooses for others; value self over others; inappropriately close body language; possible feelings of righteousness and vulnerability.

“I will only survive if I am invulnerable and able to control others.”

The group is invited to return to the mountain pose and feel the transition.

Assertive

As people are invited into an assertive posture, they often say, “It is the mountain pose!” Some widen their arms, open, and curious. Here too, some key features are highlighted:

- Chooses for self and negotiates; value self equal to others; “I messages”; attentive listening; erect body stance; possible feelings of confidence and self-respect.
- “I want to get and give respect, ask for fair play, compromise.”

The group is invited to return to the mountain pose and feel the transition. Some say “I hardly shifted position!”

The whole group engages in a reflective dialogue about their experience with this practice, how mindfulness informs wise choices, and the possibility to cultivate a greater range of responses.

Another practice that can be used to demonstrate these three dispositions is found in the Resources section, it is titled Life Space: Demonstrating passive aggressive and assertive dispositions.

Practice: Aikido Postures

Aikido is a Japanese martial art developed by Morihei Ueshiba (Stevens, 1987) as a way for practitioners to protect themselves while they also protected the attacker from injury. It is often translated as “the way of unifying with life energy.” The movements in aikido consist of meeting the energy or movements that are approaching and redirecting in a way that diffuses an attack while creating greater harmony. While the art of Aikido involves extensive training and practice, the series of physically interactive exercises offer a teaching that illuminates the values and practices that have been cultivated throughout the entire MBSR program. The movements demonstrate possible ways of meeting interpersonal challenges as well as

challenges within oneself. *It is important for the teacher to practice these exercises with friends until she feels confident in being able to offer the demonstrations, hold the entire group, and describe how to apply the teachings to daily life. Difficult memories may be stimulated. It is essential for the teacher to establish safety and leave time for group discussion.*

Below is a description of a process employing the aikido movements. The teacher first introduces this to the group and asks the group to form a circle in the room and describes the process of demonstrating a number of ways of meeting challenges—whether internal or external. Then she invites the whole group to participate with close awareness of the body as if they were practicing the body scan. *Finally, she chooses a person in the group who is willing and physically able to function as a partner. “It will involve engaging movements a number of times and also involves making physical contact with me. This is OK with me.”*

First interaction: The teacher invites the partner to stand opposite her. “You will be aggressive, so, holding your arms outstretched towards me, and keeping your elbows locked, come toward me with some energy—make contact with your hands at my shoulders.”

As the person does this, the teacher is often knocked slightly off balance. As they come back to the center of the circle, the teacher engages a dialogue with the partner, “What did you notice as we did that?” The response is often: “I didn’t want to hit you! It felt odd.” The teacher shares: “I knew it was coming, but still did not like getting knocked off balance.” The teacher then checks in with the group: “What were you aware of?” Participants respond: “I gasped, this is too reminiscent of my past.” “I was surprised, and felt my stomach tighten.” “I felt angry.” The teacher can help the participants to reflect on how their automatic reactions are shaped by their personal stories and habits of thought and emotion.

Second interaction: The teacher invites the partner: “Let’s try this again. Please come toward me once more, keeping your arms outstretched and elbows locked and palms facing towards me.” This time, as the “aggressor” approaches, the teacher steps quickly out of the way. The teacher asks how the partner feels: “I didn’t like it.” “I felt duped, surprised, and out of control.” The teacher adds, “And this time, I didn’t get hit.” Checking in with the group, the teacher may hear: “I was relieved that you got out of the way, but I was concerned for the other person, too.” “I wanted to laugh.”

Third interaction: The teacher repeats the stepping away, but this time also drops to the floor saying: “It is all my fault. I am sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.” She then dialogues with the “aggressor” and asks how he or she feels. “I find that I feel angry.” “All this self-blame, just makes me mad. It makes me feel helpless.”

The teacher says, “This time, I got out of your way, and I took all the blame. The problem is still here.” The teacher checks in with the group and asks what they are noticing in their body and mind. The teacher may help them reflect on their experiences, noting that “This is a passive approach which denies one’s own rights.

Stepping away by taking full responsibility is a way to try to appease the situation as quickly as possible in order to stay safe. The teacher can also normalize times of needing to deny or avoid saying: “If you were a young child in an untenable situation, denial is what you had, but as you grow older, it can become a pattern and a burden and not a help. You can cultivate more ways to meet challenges.”

Fourth interaction: The teacher asks the partner to approach once more aggressively. This time, the teacher engages by gripping the partner’s hands or arms. The two exert force toward one another moving in circles. The teacher asks the group: “Does this look familiar?” Then she and the partner add words, saying “I’m right!” “No, I’m right!” over and over again.

Inviting discussion about the experience, the teacher asks, “How familiar was this? Trying to have your way, pushing against? How effective was this?” It is clear to see—it ends in going in circles! She then clarifies and normalizes the times one needs to fight injustice and push against what may not be wholesome attitudes and behaviors in relationships and society. The teacher invites the group to share their reflections.

Final scenario: The teacher asks the “aggressor” to approach once more. This time, however, the teacher maintains eye contact while stepping slightly to the side. With her right hand, the teacher takes hold of the partner’s right wrist with the thumb and forefinger and leans in slightly, using the momentum of the partner’s forward movement to turn with him or her, walking now side by side in the same direction. It is also then possible to turn the aggressor in a different direction—showing the teacher’s “point of view.”

The teacher then dialogues with the “aggressor” and asks how he or she feels and invites the group to share their experiences with this scenario. The teacher notes that by stepping to the side, she did not get knocked down by the oncoming force, and by making eye contact she was able to see clearly while connecting and was able to harness the oncoming energy to redirect the movement. She asks of the group, “How might this way of meeting and working with challenges manifest in our daily lives? For example, you have a project you need to prepare. You can deny and procrastinate; resist and fight making time to do what is needed. Or, you can acknowledge it, “lean into” the actual problem needing attention, the emotions and meaning associated with it. This is turning toward. From this, one can decide with a step-by-step process how best to complete the task. On an emotional level, when grief, sadness, hurt, and confusion, are allowed and acknowledged, a clearer resolution may be found.”

Practice: Verbal Aikido

Class members at times have said: “This is helpful, but how would this be in a difficult conversation? They request a verbal demonstration of this aikido process. Below is an example of applying the aikido principles in a scenario between the teacher and a volunteer.

After preparing the group to bring awareness to bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions as they experience this practice, the teacher asks the volunteer to express some dissatisfaction or displeasure, anger or frustration toward the teacher.

A. Participant: “I am so mad that you are not more available.”

Teacher: “Oh”

This is “taking the hit.”

B. Participant: “I am so mad that you are not more available.”

Teacher: “Did you hear the news today? The weather is going to be very cold.”

This is avoiding, denying, stepping away from the issue.

C. Participant: “I am so mad that you are not more available.”

Teacher: “You’re mad! You have no idea how mad I am...how you are so demanding and don’t understand.”

This is opposing what is presented. Aggression is met with aggression.

D. Participant: “I am so mad that you are not more available.”

Teacher: “Wow, you’re really angry. You wish we could have more time together.”

“I wish that too. Maybe we can check for times that are ok for both of us.”

This is meeting the other, acknowledging the emotions and situation and working together toward resolution. It is aikido—the way of unifying. Many people express a sigh of recognition as they are shown these different scenarios.

MBSR teaching invites and cultivates the possibility to be aware of what is happening as it is happening without judgment. The aikido exercises are teachings about how one can strengthen being with the lived experience, meeting challenges wisely and discovering nondual solutions that may be beneficial to all.

Insight Dialogue and Interpersonal Mindfulness Program

Cultivation of mindfulness alone, and with others, is done both formally and informally throughout the entire MBSR program. As a response to participants’ wanting more interpersonal practice, a graduate class has been developed with the key focus on relational meditation practice. The Interpersonal Mindfulness Program (IMP) has been developed to support the deepening of MBSR participant’s ongoing meditation practices. The IMP is an 8-week protocol based upon Insight Dialogue guidelines (Kramer, 2007) and an MBSR framework. The course is designed to help participants cultivate and establish mindfulness in moments of sensory and relational contact. It provides a format and container for exploring the shared human experience. It offers a mindfulness practice (drawn from the foundation of Insight Dialogue), developed to take place in relationships, and an interpersonal understanding of the stress that arises in relation to others. The course offers the opportunity to observe and release habitual ways of relating and to experience being with other people outside of that conditioning. It allows participants to deepen their

understanding of stress reactivity and their potential to respond. Both the Interpersonal Mindfulness Program and the broader framework of Insight Dialogue utilize the same meditation guidelines and the relational meditation form based on the meditation practice of Insight Dialogue developed by Vipassana meditation teacher, Gregory Kramer, Ph.D.

What Is Insight Dialogue?

Insight Dialogue (Kramer, 2007) (ID) is an innovative, structured interpersonal meditation practice aimed at cultivating freedom individually and collectively. It extends mindfulness and tranquility of silent meditation to interactions with others. The practice seamlessly weaves the three domains of meditation, wisdom, and relationship as a whole life path. It has its roots in the specific dispensation of the Buddha's early teachings and invites study, contemplation, and embodied action rooted in this practice interface.

The inspiration for Insight Dialogue emerged as Greg Kramer discovered (although he ardently practiced and studied the Dharma) that he returned home from attending multiple long silent retreats only to find the same repetitive and binding patterns in his relationships with his family. He became interested in the possibility of closing the gap and supporting a pathway that led to potential awakening in and through relationship and kinship.

Insight Dialogue responds to the inquiry of what it might be to meet another with mindfulness and greater steadiness. With *mindfulness and dialogue*, each of the two participants, through choosing to be present and in relationship, supports the other to awaken the mind's great potential for awareness and freedom. In this practice, the individual has the opportunity to explore how innate wisdom manifests within relationships when the separate "I" is more spacious. The structure establishes the practice as meditation. Distinct from improving communication effectiveness as a "communication exercise," this practice invites participants into relational practice through the progressive engagement of meditation *guidelines*. As the practice unfolds with guidance from the teacher, individuals speak and listen to one another, pausing with awareness, incorporating presence, silence, and spaciousness into dialogue.

The focus of the dialogue is a topic of reflection or *contemplation* that has the potential to evoke and deepen wisdom. Contemplations may focus on human realities, such as aging, illness and death, roles, judgments, generosity, and gratitude. Feelings of being separate are illuminated and investigated through the dialogue practice as people explore their identification with their personal historical life circumstances, opinions, and with the raw explication of comparisons: feeling better than, worse than, or the same as others. Each contemplation has the potential to illuminate the root causes of human suffering. The guidelines and the contemplations work together inviting investigation of direct experience.

The guidelines offer support for awakening while engaged in relationship. The challenges of human contact are met with the meditative qualities evoked by each

guideline. All of the guidelines compliment each other and cultivate a capacity for balanced receptivity and presence in relationship.

Pause calls forth mindfulness; *relax*, tranquility and acceptance; *open*, relational availability and spaciousness; *trust emergence*, flexibility and letting go; *listen deeply*, receptivity and attunement; and *speak the truth*, integrity and care.

Awakening to the shared human condition through relationship manifests in this dynamic process of engaging in an intentional dialogue practice.

Patience and focus are strengthened in this process. In this experience of mutuality emerges recognition of the innate wholeness, genius, and spaciousness inherent in both/all people. The rigid and frozen sense of a separate, fixed self, a solid *I, me, mine*, can ease with greater compassion. A co-created fluidity of experience within the sharing ignites awareness of constant change, highlighting impermanence. As each individual shares personal views, struggles, and challenges, a growing sense of the unifying truth of suffering emerges. Moreover, in the vitality of the dialogue practice, one's relationship with suffering can transform into greater freedom.

Interpersonal Mindfulness in MBSR

With the time boundaries of each MBSR class session, an interpersonal meditation practice is adapted while offering a taste of the potential to practice the longer dialogue sequence. The key focus is applying mindfulness, mental stability, and the interruption of habitual stress reaction patterns in relationship. By incorporating awareness into social contacts, the participant grows more able to respond to the perceptions, longings, and aversions that can manifest in relationship with others.

Interpersonal Mindfulness Dialogue Practice

People are asked to find a partner, preferably someone whom they do not know well. This direction is intended to give the participants more freedom from a history of fixed relational views and associations, although those connections can arise in an instant of contact. Emphasizing the importance and impact of the gift each person has the potential to offer with full presence to the other, the teacher introduces the dialogue practice as a meditation. The group often expresses surprise and shifts posture with the invitation to engage in a dialogue practice as meditation. Speaking occurs only during the dialogue, and silence is maintained during pausing and between each phase of practice. As participants find partners and sit facing one another on chairs or cushions, the teacher notes that the practice has several levels of focus and will take time. One person will be speaking while the other is listening, and they will each have a turn. The meditation guideline, *pause*, is introduced as well as the direction to slow down speech and interaction to allow mindfulness to strengthen. One is invited to pause when pulled away from being fully present by

distraction, judgment, impatience, strong emotions, or desires, whether one is speaking or listening. Engaging the practice of pausing allows connecting with the body, the breath, and the moment.

The teacher offers guidance about how very sensitive we are as human beings and that sitting with another with direct eye contact may be strongly stimulating. It is important to normalize this reaction and give permission to look down or away and not stare at the partner. It is suggested that people do not keep eyes closed throughout the dialogue practice. When reactions occur they can be known and met with kindness. A bell will ring to invite the speaker into silence.

After a brief pause of stillness, the listener offers what s/he heard through the partner's words and voice tone and what was seen as the speaker expressed with movements of the eyes, face, hands, and gestures.

First Dialogue

Guideline: a focus on the guideline *pause*

Contemplation: an experience in one's current life where one experiences a challenge

Dialogue: One speaker/one listener

Speaker: 4 minutes

Listener: offers back what was heard through words, voice tone, and speed and what was seen through bodily expression. (4 minutes) Partners reverse

Second Dialogue

This dialogue does not have separate speakers. It is an open, interactive practice with the invitation for both people to rest in the moment of change, speak what is true in this moment, and to listen deeply internally and to one another. It might be expressed as speaking and listening from the heart, from presence. The teacher invites the participants to pause often to strengthen mindfulness and allow the speaking to emerge from this awareness.

A bell rings to begin and end the interactive dialogue practice. The dyad partners briefly share their experiences of the practice together.

The whole class opens a discussion about learnings and challenges as they engaged with the practice.

Insight Dialogue Meditation Guidelines

The six Insight Dialogue Meditation guidelines are as follows:

- Pause: From reactivity to mindfulness.
- Relax: Allow what is perceived internally/externally in the present.
- Open: Widen the lens of awareness; wake up to the experience interconnectivity.

- Trust emergence: Abide and attend with the experience of constant change.
- Listen deeply: Recognize how meaning is carried through words, body language, and most of all, presence.
- Speak the truth: Say what is true from investigating the experience of the body, mind, and heart.

Exploring the Guidelines in MBSR

- *Pause*

The guideline *pause* is of central importance. It is the initial suggestion to step out of habit and bring mindful awareness to the moment. It is an invitation to wake up. As mindfulness, it opens the door to the present moment, to a movement from grasping to non-grasping. It interrupts the habitual pressure of pushing forward and away from what is alive in present moment experience. In Class 6 and throughout the MBSR program, this pausing and choosing to be present is encouraged. In MBSR, it is often expressed with the symbol STOP:

S: Stop and pause.

T: Take a breath; come to bodily sensations.

O: Open—widen the focus of attending; observe nonjudgmentally what is happening internally and externally.

P: Proceed, or pause again.

In the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) Program the guidance through the *three-minute* or *three-step breathing space* encourages this pausing into awareness and offers a spacious, nonjudgmental brief practice to reconnect with the present moment.

- *Relax*

The guideline *relax* must be held with delicacy in teaching MBSR as it often is encountered as a hoped for *outcome* of the meditation practices by class participants. Teachers clarify it is awareness that is cultivated. Within that knowing, tension, restlessness,

Three-Minute Breathing Space (Segal, Williams, Teasdale, 2002)

Awareness

Bringing yourself into the present moment, adopting an alert yet comfortable posture, close your eyes if this is comfortable and bring your attention inward. Becoming aware of your body and the surface upon which you are sitting, draw your focus to the spine, each vertebra stacked upon the other from sacrum to skull.

Now, turning your attention to your thoughts and feelings, ask “What thoughts and feelings are present right now? What bodily sensations are present?”

Acknowledge your experience in this moment, even if it is unwanted.

Gathering

Now, gently direct your awareness to your breathing, following each inbreath and each outbreath.

Expanding

Now, expanding your awareness to the whole body, imagine that you are breathing with the body as a whole, including your posture and facial expression. When you’re ready, open your eyes and return to your activities.

pleasant, and unpleasantness may be perceived. Teachers can then underscore that ease and relaxation may be an effect or by-product of the practice, but clinging tightly to the *wish* for relaxation is counterproductive. The Insight Dialogue guideline *relax* points to the ability to allow what is present as one becomes aware of what is experienced. Within the pause, agitation is often revealed, a desire for life to be different from the way it is in the moment, and resistance may be felt in the body and mind. With the guidance of *relax*, support is offered to dwell with what is. Greater tranquility, kindness, and steadiness to tolerate reactivity are cultivated with the guideline, *relax*. The words of poet Danna Faulds express this practice powerfully.

Allow

There is no controlling life.
 Try corralling a lightning bolt,
 containing a tornado. Dam a
 stream and it will create a new
 channel. Resist, and the tide
 will sweep you off your feet.
 Allow, and grace will carry
 you to higher ground. The only
 safety lies in letting it all in –
 the wild and the weak; fear,
 fantasies, failures and success.
 When loss rips off the doors of
 the heart, or sadness veils your
 vision with despair, practice
 becomes simply bearing the truth.
 In the choice to let go of your
 Known way of being, the whole
 world is revealed to your new eyes.

Danna Faulds 2002

- *Open*

Pause and *relax* establish mindfulness and tranquility. In *pause*, the freshness of the beginner's mind is welcomed as awareness of the body, emotions, and thoughts are met with curiosity. *Relax* cultivates acceptance, receptivity, and kindness. The guideline *open* relates to a flexibility of the scope of focus: opening awareness internally and externally and widening to others and to the spaciousness available within the breath, the whole body, and environment. This opening can deepen acceptance and the ability to hold discomfort in a wider field without rejecting the unwanted. This guidance strengthens a pliable mind state vital in all meditation practice. Within interpersonal meditation practice, the guideline, *open*, can be liberating, as it softens the rigid definitions and boundaries between self and others. This process is beautifully expressed in the poem by Wendy Egyoku Nakao (1992):

May we open to a deeper understanding
 And a genuine love and caring
 For the multitude of faces
 Who are none other than ourself.

- *Trust Emergence*

This guideline reveals the ever-changing moment; in fact, it directly explores impermanence. In the moment of interpersonal contact, much is vibrating with constant change. Thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations are streaming, if not expressed. Here, impermanence becomes the object of practice. Creativity flourishes in the flow of not knowing, surprise, and change. The courage to pause and trust the reality of emergence allows greater ease and the ability to step out the habit-driven pulse to keep talking, say something clever, predict what the other will say, or plan our response. Change is reliable! It can be rested in and known directly with this meditation guideline.

- *Listen Deeply*

Meditation itself has been referred to as deep listening—an attuning with one’s direct experience. With the guideline *listen deeply*, the ability to cultivate tranquility while being present with one’s self and another creates conditions for the generosity of offering full attentiveness to what is being expressed internally and externally. The listener pauses into steady presence, absorbing the details of the exchange. *Listen deeply* encourages a listening with the ears and eyes. One becomes aware of the nuances of communication as the body expresses through facial and hand movements, and words are used to explicate experience.

- *Speak the Truth*

This guideline takes the support of all the others, to pause in awareness, and allow what is known: to open to the space of mutuality and trust the emergence of constant change as well as the practice of listening deeply to oneself and others. To speak the truth, one must pause and connect with one’s experience, feel into the body, and sense what is emerging as true expression. Qualities of wise speech are pillars of this guideline: truthfulness, sensitivity, patience, courage, non-harming, and trust all offer support. To speak the truth, one must connect deeply to know what is the subjective truth in the moment. Clarity is needed to select words that express the meaning one wants to convey.

Insight Dialogue invites the meditator to pause and allow words to rise from greater silence. The Indian philosophy, Kashmir Shaivism (Brooks et al., 1997), describes speech as existing on multiple levels of expression. The levels are as follows:

- *Vaikharī vāk*—spoken word, exterior
- *Madhyamā vāk*—mental speech, interior
- *Paśyanī vāk*—pure intuition, pre-speech
- *Parāvāk*—silence, unity, freedom

This articulation of levels of speech offers another framework to engage with the invitation to “meditate together, speak from silence.” Engaging the guidance of speaking the truth, pausing allows a deeper inquiry into listening deeply to the emergence of words, thoughts, and body sense as well as the presence of stillness while with another person.

Beyond the MBSR Course: Extended Insight Dialogue and Interpersonal Mindfulness Practice

A sample of a longer practice is described below to express the larger context of the depth and intention of the ID/IMP practice. It is strongly suggested that teachers regularly attend Insight Dialogue retreats to fully experience and comprehend the potential freedom of the practice.

- Guidelines: All have been introduced; all are engaged in the practice.
- Contemplation: The hungers
- Speaker/Listener
- 5 minutes each and 5 minutes shared dialogue with each other.

After people have settled in with their partners, the teacher introduces the contemplation, expressing that choosing to be awake in life involves recognizing the difficulty, challenge, and stress present in all lives. Interpersonally, stress manifests with the unpleasant aspects of every relationship; the cause of such stress is wanting the relationship to be different from the way it is. There is a push to have control, to “have it our way,” which causes tension, resistance, and pain. The wanting can manifest in three main ways:

- The hunger for interpersonal pleasure and the avoidance of interpersonal pain
- The hunger to be seen or acknowledged interpersonally
- The hunger to escape, to be invisible, not to engage with others, or to avoid intimacy

With introduction of the exploration of these hungers, it is important to include balance. These hungers are not to be judged, but are known simply as the dynamics of being human. They may have natural, wholesome expressions as well as be a cause of pain and stress. Acknowledging the experience of these patterns offers a deeper sense of self-knowing that can provide access to greater ease.

First Contemplation: The Interpersonal Hunger for Pleasure and the Avoidance of Pain

Teacher: “Where do you experience this longing for interpersonal pleasure in your life? How does it manifest? As you explore these questions, you may become aware of the longing for interpersonal pleasure with your partner, right now. You can meet this longing with gentle awareness. It is normal for us to enjoy one another’s company. But, perhaps you have noticed times when you felt lonely and kept trying to reach a friend—any friend—with whom to talk. At these times, something else is going on. We are using this longing as a strategy to escape the unpleasant experience of being alone. Many people check Facebook several times a day to see whether people have responded to their recent posts. Allow yourself to take the support of the practice and your meditation partner. *Engage the guidelines: Pause, Relax, Open, Trust Emergence, Listen Deeply, Speak the Truth.*”

Speaker and listener reverse roles.
 Intersperse each dialogue with a pause invited with a bell.
 Dyad engages in open dialogue.
 Pause into silence.

Second Contemplation: The Hunger to Be Seen

Teacher: “The hunger to be seen, acknowledged, and approved of, is natural, and yet it can compel our actions. To depend on approval from others is a way to fill a need to feel valued from outside our selves. Where do you long for this approval? How do you recognize this at home, with your family and at work? Do you hope for this approval from your community?”

“Some of our activities hinge on this longing to be approved of, to be appreciated and admired. It is the drive beneath the actions that traps us. A teenager who acted in every high school play said that she was really longing to be seen by her parents. Since this goal did not happen at home, she performed so that they would applaud with the others in the audience. This longing is a hunger to be seen. Some people may make donations as long as large plaques with their names are prominently displayed. The actual action may be beneficial, but the urge for recognition comes from a sense of separation. As you engage in practice now, approach with gentleness, and rest in the meditation guidelines: *Pause, Relax, Open, Trust Emergence, Listen Deeply, Speak the Truth.*”

Speaker and listener reverse roles.
 Intersperse each dialogue with a pause invited with a bell.
 Dyad engages in open dialogue.
 Pause into silence.

Third Contemplation: The Hunger Not to Be Seen

Teacher: “This is the hunger to disappear, to escape interaction and engagement with others. It manifests in all of the ways we hide. Feelings of shame, unworthiness, and addictive withdrawal are ways of not being seen. There are times we choose to be alone, to have the solace of solitude. This is not that, but a driven desire to get out, to not be and to be invisible. There was a Broadway play called: ‘Stop the World, I want to Get Off.’ This expresses this longing to get out and avoid contact with others. With gentleness and care, explore the ways you want to hide and to avoid intimacy and intensity with others in your family and at work. Speak your truth and listen deeply, resting in the guidelines of *pausing, allowing, opening and trusting emergence.*”

Speaker and listener reverse roles.
 Intersperse each dialogue with a pause invited with a bell.
 Dyad engages in open dialogue.
 Pause into silence.

Closing Interpersonal Meditation Practice

The whole group engages in dialogue about their experience of the practice reflecting on the guidelines, the contemplations, the hungers, compassion, and meeting the moment as it arises. People share that they identified the desires for being seen from wearing flashy clothes, to being the joker in school. They share becoming more awake to their craving to not be alone by joining several community projects or the desire to escape interactions with others through isolation. Pausing allows more awareness, and allowing gives the strength to be with the urges as they manifest. Opening creates space and invites a larger sense of being. The group engages in the dialogue with stillness and spontaneity.

Close with a loving kindness meditation.

Immensity, Intimacy, and Immediacy

The whole of MBSR may be seen as a vehicle with the potential to support a person in becoming more intimate with one's immediate unfolding life, and in so doing, perhaps touch the radiant immensity that interpenetrates and is far beyond the contracted construction of "me." Through relationship "me" is most firmly defined. Through relationship and kinship of community, the limited separateness of "me" can begin to unbind. MBSR is a relationship-based learning that encourages knowing oneself in relationship with one's body, opinions, thoughts, emotions, pain and suffering, values and ethics, and ease and connection. This wonder of *being with* extends to being with others. In this process, one can discover the be-longing to being human and the collective wisdom that is available in mutuality. Through the 8-week program, the intimacy with self expands to intimacy with others. People who would not imagine being friends socially, become strong meditation partners. Truths are spoken within a structure of practice that cultivates safety. In this way, intimacy is constructed over the 8 weeks, from shared time, learning, and discipline; it is also unconstructed, with anonymity and the freedom of rarely having historical views of classmates, as well as the ongoing cultivation of freshness of the beginner's mind. The MBSR program has the potential to develop into a transformational field as the group deepens with regular mindfulness practice. Alone and together, participants grow and refine their enthusiasm and energy to engage mindfulness, concentration, investigation, equanimity, joy, and compassion. Aware relationship becomes a force of resonance and freedom. The Buddha taught that good friends are essential to waking up and engaging with the path to freedom (Ghosa Suttas: Voice (AN 2.125-126), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), & 30 November, 2013). He named two elements essential in establishing clear seeing or right view: the voice of another and wise attention. Throughout the fabric of the experience of the MBSR program, these two elements form the warp and weave.

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