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MINDFULNESS BASED COGNITIVE THERAPY:  
EMBODIED PRESENCE & INQUIRY IN PRACTICE

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## Chapter 8

# Inquiry as Contemplative Dialogue

Inquiry is the discussion between teacher and participants that takes place following the meditation practices and cognitive exercises. Considering its centrality in MBP, inquiring into a participant's experience has received relatively little attention, compared with other components of MBCT. Until recently, little has been written either discussing or researching the process. Crane et al. (2015) published a qualitative study analyzing the delivery of inquiry by senior teachers. However, the remaining literature consists of relatively short descriptions or chapters in manuals or books of various MBPs (Brandsma, 2017; Crane, 2008, 2017; Woods, 2010; McCown, Reibel, & Micozzi, 2011; Segal et al., 2002, 2013; Santorelli, 2016). This may in part reflect the difficulty in conceptualizing and then describing a highly experiential and interactive process, fluid and contingent on what participants express in the group resulting from their experience and learning.

Inquiry has been defined in a number of ways including: an "investigative" or "participatory dialogue" (Crane, 2008), "dialogue and inquiry" (Santorelli, 2016; Woods, Rockman, & Collins, 2016), a "sequence" of "turn taking" (Crane, 2015), a distinct skill of asking questions and dialogue consisting of a "back and forth exchange" while "keeping the space open..." (Santorelli, 2016), or an "exploration of personal practice... reactions... patterns and (their) implications..." (Brandsma, 2017). It is, as Crane (2008) writes, "... a key aspect of the teaching... as it facilitates a 'translation' of direct experience arising within the mindfulness practices into learning that participants can apply into their lives" (p. 143). As we can see, there is little consensus about what inquiry is, how to engage in it, whether or not it can actually be explicitly taught (Santorelli, 2016;

Crane et al., 2015), or if there is even a fixed structure to it (Brandsma, 2017). This chapter is our attempt to add clarity to this aspect of MBCT that is often cited as the most difficult to learn (Segal et al., 2013; Crane, et al., 2015; Woods, 2010).

We see the process of inquiry as a contemplative practice embodying the mindful presence of the teacher described in the previous two chapters of this book. Inquiry as first elucidated in MBCT was understood as a reflection on practice that has two stages, one of which is to describe the actual experience and the second to comment on it (Segal et al., 2002, 2013). The process was subsequently more formally described by Crane (2008) as a practice or skill to be learned consisting of three layers. The first layer entails recognition or noticing experience, the second involves attention to what is salient (what is standing out compared to automatic ways of attending) and tracking the unfolding components of experience, and the third addresses integrating and understanding how mindfulness is relevant to preventing depression and anxiety and staying well.

In this chapter, we'll explore inquiry as a *contemplative dialogue between teacher and participant(s) that supports the investigation of experience arising from the practice of mindfulness*. Inquiry is the part of the program in which mindful presence is at its most dynamic, interactive, and difficult to embody. It is where the heart of the practice is revealed.

## A Contemplative Dialogue

We have chosen the term “contemplative dialogue” as a complement to the word “inquiry” because we think that it is a closer articulation of what is occurring during the interactions between a teacher and his participants. To contemplate upon something is a process that involves observation, examination, and reflection. This process as it pertains to a contemplative dialogue includes both an active agent and a receptive one: the active agent is the one that the MBCT teacher facilitates through conversation, and the reflective agent is the one that becomes internalized by participants as a result of these conversations. By bringing an internal observation, examination, and reflection to the practices of mindfulness, participants have a skill that can be employed to work with challenging mind and mood states and ultimately engage in self-care.

Inquiry with a contemplative focus is an attentive and meditative expression of mindfulness, representing foundational principles and attitudinal qualities that reinforce the ability of both teacher and participant(s) to stay present to what is occurring at any time (Woods, 2010; Santorelli, 2016; Woods et al., 2016). This includes a present-moment orientation, embodying the attitudinal foundations and communicating (in a contemporary manner) the three characteristics or marks of existence as described in previous chapters: suffering (resistance to what is), impermanence (nothing lasts), and not-self (events and experience as impersonal, dependent upon context, and universal).

The intention of these conversations with participants is to support reflection on their experience of mindfulness practices, cognitive exercises, home practice, and the application of mindfulness to everyday life. This interactive process uses a series of open-ended questions, observations, wonderings, and reflections. The objects of investigation are the actual noticing of experience (and one's relationship to it); its components, qualities, and temporal nature; and the integration of what is learned through this exploration into daily life. Through this process of honing the participant's skill of describing direct experience and reflecting on what has just occurred versus narrating (following a storyline), decreased identification with experience is cultivated.

A central theme for the process is to assist and develop the ability to be both participant and observer of one's internal and external environment rather than getting overwhelmed or overly identified with it. By attending to the movement of experience as "sensation" (including thoughts and emotions), the attachment to and importance of the narrative of our lives is lessened. This, of course, is directly tied to the intentions of MBCT, which are to support participants in reducing the suffering so often a part of depression and anxiety and to guide them in developing relapse prevention skills. The participants in the MBCT program learn that their experiences and problems are not personal but rather universal.

A potential pitfall for the teacher articulating the contemplative nature of inquiry is an inclination to conflate the structure or method of the inquiry process (by asking specific and layered questions) with its contemplative character, an embodied mindfulness practice. That is, they engage in question-and-answer about specific and isolated experiences, rather than using the inquiry to convey subtle instruction for the participant about how to move through noticing, tracking, and integrating or understanding experience. It is the difference between the doing mode of inquiry and being in a contemplative conversation with participant. It is, in part, this tendency, in our opinion, that leads to some of the difficulty and confusion around its practice. We use the three layers identified by Crane (2008) as an entry point to our discussion on inquiry.

## The Three Layers: A Framework for Inquiry

We think that the three layers of inquiry—recognition or noticing experience, the ability to track the components of experience as it unfolds, and the integration of this experience into one's understanding of mindfulness and how it prevents depression and anxiety and promotes staying well—are useful anchors for initially learning how to best facilitate it via questions and reflections.

The framework of the layers helps organize the teacher's thinking and understanding of the process. It is informed by key attitudes and principles of mindfulness and has at its core an experiential understanding of what is being expressed in the group. It does, however, put the teacher's inquiry at risk of becoming mechanistic or rote. For the novice teacher, facilitating inquiry by moving through these layers and their associated

questions and reflections is akin to using a script when first learning to guide a meditation versus guiding from one's own practice. Over time, as a teacher, you will internalize the process of inquiry as a mindfulness practice in its own right.

## The First Layer: What Did You Notice?

As discussed in the literature (Segal et al., 2013; Crane, 2008), the layers are in part a heuristic device to help both teacher and participant develop a common language in which to review what occurs in the practice or cognitive exercises. It also provides a structured way of thinking about this process, particularly for novice mindfulness teachers and those in training. In the first layer of questions, which are aimed at helping participants recognize what is present for them, participants are often asked, What did you notice about this experience (this sitting meditation or this exercise)?—reflecting the attitudinal foundation of curiosity. Participants often respond with comments about preferences (what they liked or didn't like) or an assumption about causality (this happened because), even though the teacher may have asked specifically about the participant's experience itself. That is, participants default to analysis, rather than describing experience as the teacher is asking them to do. When a participant presents a lot of ideas or interpretations about what happened in the practice, the teacher can respond with a general comment—"Oh, so you noticed a lot of thoughts coming up," or "That's one idea"—then redirect her to this aspect of inquiry: what she noticed. One of the aims for a teacher is to highlight for participants how easy it is to move into narration and to encourage a return of attention to direct experience. What is also gently brought into the participants' awareness is how commonly they engage in negative self-evaluations or other evaluations and the effect of this on mood and behavior. For example, in answering a participant who says, "I'm a lousy meditator," the teacher replies, "It sounds like there are some judgmental thoughts. When you noticed this judgment, what emotions or body sensations were you aware of, if any?" In this way, the teacher is making the link between harsh evaluations against the self and mood.

Awareness of and learning to pay attention to all experience is an important factor of what is being taught in the MBCT program. Neuroimaging studies in both long-term meditators and participants in mindfulness groups have supported this impact of cultivating such attention to present-moment sensations, suspending the immediate judgment or narration about experience. These studies suggest, how in response to emotional challenges, there is less reliance on cortical midline regions associated with narrative self-focus and dysphoric reactivity, in favor of a balance between such narration and sensory pathways, (Farb et al., 2007; Farb, Anderson, & Segal, 2012).

What this means is that participants learn to interrupt rumination or anxious thinking when needed, in favor of shifting attention to body sensations, learning to observe and describe the actual moment rather than getting lost in their ideas or conclusions about it. This is referred to as a shift from narrative self-referencing

(storytelling) to experiential self-referencing (moment-to-moment describing of experience). Finally, the first layer begins heightening the awareness of all experience for participants regardless of whether it is joyful, difficult, or neutral.

While the above research can assist the teacher in understanding the value of bringing attention to the body when difficult states emerge, it is equally if not more important to recognize that in inquiry, we are concerned with the entirety of a participant's experience, which includes attention to thoughts, emotions, body sensations, behaviors, and impulses to act. Although attention to body sensations is an initial training, a teacher must recognize other aspects of sensation and experiences in his inquiry. A narrow and default focus on the body in inquiry, common in new MBCT teachers, is overly simplistic.

## The Second Layer: How Might This Way of Paying Attention Be Different? And Then What Happened? And Then?

What is referred to as the second layer asks participants to reflect upon how they are meeting experience, their relationship to what is being noticed, and how this might be different from how they usually pay attention, eat, move their body, and so forth. This question is also asking participants how paying attention mindfully is different. This is intended to help them recognize that there may be other ways to relate to experience than the ones they typically employ.

After the first couple of sessions the question, *How might this be different?* is dropped, as participants develop an understanding of mindfulness and that another way of paying attention is being learned. From this point, the tracking of experience is emphasized by asking, *“And then what happened? And then?”* This form of inquiry stresses attention to the internal, sequential, unfolding nature of each moment. Its purpose is to increase the capacity of participants to stay close to their experience, track it, and recognize the relationship between its various components. These components consist of thoughts, emotions, body sensations, impulses to act, and behaviors.

A central feature of this second layer of inquiry is that it enables participants to develop a new perspective on habitual ways of thinking and an enhanced awareness of contingencies. Highlighting these components deconstructs experience; it works to make difficulties more manageable, keeping people in the present and reducing the tendency to fall into a cascade of ruminative or obsessive thinking that may hijack mood or perpetuate stress reactivity. The process of inquiry enhances mindful attending, supporting distress tolerance and enhancing affect regulation.

## The Third Layer: And How Might This Relate to Preventing Depressive Relapse, Managing Difficult Mind and Mood States, or Staying Well?

The third layer of inquiry is about integrating, or linking, what has been learned in the group to everyday life and its vicissitudes. It is about helping participants apply and test out what has been learned. Early in the program, group members are asked to consider how the practices might prevent or reduce depression, anxiety, or distress; later, they are asked more generally how the practices might help them stay well. This implies that there is a skillful next step to dealing with problems and that this can be learned. The third layer is therefore hopeful and embodies personal accountability for making change. Early on in MBCT and other MBPs, this line of questioning helps participants make connections between seemingly idiosyncratic practices, like eating a raisin, scanning one's body, or following one's breath, and their reasons for coming to the group. Making these links and applying them to everyday experiences is an essential part of adult learning.

This takes participants well beyond the common misconception that the practice of mindfulness is simply about relaxation or just learning to meditate. The linking to a future where they have more self-efficacy and skills for self-care, with mindful attention allowing them to determine which skill to use and when, is essential. It helps create a bridge from the experiential to the conceptual, increasing understanding and acceptance of the practices by participants. The third layer is about helping participants apply and test out what has been learned. In the example below, we have a conversation about home practice between a teacher and a participant. They are talking about the Three-Minute Breathing Space in session 5 ("Allowing and Letting Be").

*Teacher:* Let's turn our attention to the Three-Minute Breathing Space. Anyone have a chance to use it this past week?

*Participant 1:* I was able to use it quite a lot this past week.

*Teacher:* Yes?

*Participant 1:* I had a busy week at work and was commuting home, and the subway was hot and stuffy. After a long day, I would have been really irritated and impatient. But I decided to use the Three-Minute Breathing Space. And you know something? It made a difference.

*Teacher:* How? In what way?

*Participant 1:* I still felt the irritation and even noticed the tension in my shoulders and jaw, but then I didn't obsess over it, and it gradually eased.

*Teacher:* (turning to the whole group) This is interesting. So, how is this useful?

*Participant 2:* I guess this shows that you can use it anywhere. The problem for me sometimes is to remember this.

*Participant 3:* I use it before speaking to my teenagers!

*Participant 4:* I have a dental appointment coming up, and I will use in the dentist chair!

(General laughter in the group.)

As the program progresses, the teacher will move away from the construct of the three layers into a contemplative dialogue commensurate with his own maturation as a teacher (*embodiment*). In lieu of the three layers, the teacher uses the five agents of change as a conceptual frame to animate the dialogue. He will be holding the themes and agendas of each session (*protocol*) in mind when he is listening to his participants' responses after having facilitated a meditation practice. He is always referring the participants back to that practice when they move into thoughts about the past or future (*mindfulness practices*). In the meditation practices and the cognitive exercises, he assists them in making the link to everyday life, and during inquiry, he monitors group process and reinforces *individual and group learning*. The fifth agent of change, the *embodied mindful presence of the teacher*, remains salient throughout.

A structured approach to inquiry will also necessitate a teacher attending to the *Themes, Rationale, Intentions, and Practice Skills* of any given session or practice to help anchor his attention and inquiry. Moreover, horizontal inquiry (gathering a breadth of responses from participants) will be emphasized early in the program. While later, particularly when difficulties show up, vertical inquiry (deepening dialogue with one participant) is used more often.

As a guide to some of the characteristics embedded in inquiry, we see the following as important aspects:

- The teacher actively engages and embodies what he understands to be the central attitudes of the practice.
- He holds the agenda lightly, becoming comfortable with uncertainty and acknowledging not knowing what may show up in the group.
- He learns to lead his participants by following their responses, being sensitive to the verbal and nonverbal expressions by the group members.
- He actively listens to participants instead of formulating his responses while they are speaking.

- He continually asks himself, “What am I hearing?” “Do I really understand what this participant means?” checking his assumptions and asking for clarification when needed.
- He listens for narration, expectations, interpretations, and explanations, and when these show up, gently interrupts or brings into awareness these habitual ways of relating to experience.
- He engages a participant in conversation while at the same time attending to the rest of the group.
- He elicits key thematic points, helping the group make links to the rationale or utility of any practice or exercise as they apply to life and difficult mind and mood states.
- He brings curiosity to help participants enhance the granularity of their attention and tolerance for distressing events as they occur.

Holding all of this can be overwhelming to say the least, particularly when we are first learning inquiry—when it is being approached from a conceptual perspective or *doing mode*, when one is attempting to master its form. As in tai chi or other martial arts, there is an outer form, necessary to learn to engage in the practice, and then there are what are called internals that arise once one has a foundation in the external structure. So, it is with the contemplative dialogue that is inquiry, a form is helpful. The internals—a sense of curiosity; the ability to listen actively; the ability to recognize and be with the impersonal, imperfect, and impermanent; and implicitly guiding participants to do the same—come from the embodiment of mindfulness and its articulation.

## From the Conceptual to the Contemplative

Curiosity is the greatest ally for a teacher facilitating inquiry and for his participants learning about mindfulness practices. It is the antidote to making assumptions or quick judgments and to the need for assurance. When we are curious about our or another’s experience, we become interested in exploring and reflecting on whatever is happening. This is a good example of contemplation in action. One of the things this ask of a teacher is that he operates from a place of not knowing, embodying beginner’s mind at the same time holding an agenda and the need for a specific outcome lightly.

By using curiosity as a frame for his inquiry, a teacher elicits verbal descriptions, reflections, and key insights from participants that ultimately make the teaching richer. This is demonstrated by maintaining an open-ended and present-moment focus on the *what, where, when, and how* of experience. The *why* is generally not addressed as this invariably takes us out of description of experience and into analysis. The teacher works



to enhance the participants' ability to stay with what is happening in the practice. This reduces the tendency for them to move quickly into the past or future or to look for reasons why something has occurred, or to come to conclusions about experience that are often erroneous and reinforce a fixed view of self.

Questions, while open-ended, are generally short and simple. He tries to avoid the use of double-barreled questions, questions that ask about two issues but permit one answer, as in: Were you restless or agitated? and closed or leading questions, those that begin with "is," "was," "were" or "do," "does," or "did," for example: Did it change? Is this something you normally notice? Do you notice your posture is different? These tend to take the participant out of the experience, shutting down the dialogue.

An illustration of how the teacher can maintain an ongoing present-moment orientation while asking about a practice that has just occurred is described below:

- The teacher waits, listening to the participant response, and selectively reflects back to enhance the group vocabulary of experience.
- He highlights key thematic points that have been expressed when appropriate.
- He also helps participants to enhance their capacity to describe and track their experience. This descriptive process will reinforce the value of attending in this way.
- He asks permission to continue inquiry, particularly when a participant is struggling (vertical inquiry).

The teacher will frequently express gratitude for the participant's response.

The teacher needs to remember *less is more*, following the participant's lead while at the same time gently ensuring the dialogue stays on track, close to direct experience, and relevant to the theme of the session. He is judicious in his reflections or responses not needing to speak to every participant response, allowing the ones that reflect direct experience to stand on their own. The teacher exhibits patient attending that embodies the practice. He does his best not to insert his biases, attachment to outcomes, or an agenda into the participant experience.

Finally, the teacher practices modeling that all experience is open to investigation, bringing a curious and kind stance to his inquiry. No experience, "good" or "bad," is privileged over another. This does not mean that some problems don't need addressing: discerning if, when and how they are to be addressed is required by the teacher, particularly when safety is a concern.

## Active Listening

In a contemplative dialogue, the teacher's focus is on listening to the participants' attention to and deconstruction of experience as they describe what is sequentially noticed in practice (tracking). Therefore, within this context, what is valued is description over narrative and explanation to help participants interrupt such thinking behaviors as rumination and worry. A contemplative dialogue therefore requires active listening. This means that the teacher is deeply attentive to the speaker, asking for clarification when needed. He will be able to reflect, paraphrase, and judiciously use summation.

An example of this ability to describe and track experience from a meditation practice is demonstrated when a participant says, "I noticed I felt agitated and restless when you asked me to bring up a difficulty. My jaw was tight, and I felt a bit nauseous. When I brought my attention to my stomach, I felt even sicker. And then it started to lessen. When you said to breathe into overwhelming sensations, I did that, and it changed. It's still there a little." The participant's focus remains on sensations as they evolve and pass. And by maintaining this focus, the participant is discovering that such sensations *do* pass.

This is in contrast to a participant who gets lost in the narrative as in, "I brought to mind a fight I had with my boss yesterday, I realized what a jerk he is, and I started thinking that I should just quit. But then what would I do for money? I noticed my stomach was upset and I was jittery probably because I'm so mad and I drank a lot of coffee before class today. Coffee always makes me shaky. I guess I should stop drinking it."

Another important aspect of listening intently is the way a teacher brings awareness to participant reactions or attitudes. He will also attend to wanted, unwanted, and neutral experiences and to the participants' relationship to these. How individuals in the group might shift these reactions and attitudes to help recognize and prevent negative mind and mood states is an important component of changing our relationship to difficulties, particularly those that can't be changed. The teacher should actively listen for this.

## Being with the Imperfect, Impermanent, and Impersonal

As a contemplative dialogue, inquiry will utilize the teacher's understanding of the three marks of existence, outlined in Buddhist psychology and discussed previously. We tend to have a view that life should be perfect, that our selves are concrete and permanent, and that what occurs is personal. It is important for the teacher to listen for and identify these themes in his practice of inquiry with respect to what he asks about and reflects back to participants. This is because the suffering we experience will be described from a variety of perspectives including, but not limited to, our resistance to

what is. The teacher can, by listening for these moments, help his participants change their relationship to difficulties, for example, "I was so impatient." "I was so bored." "This was so good I didn't want it to end." "This shouldn't be happening." "I shouldn't feel this way." All these statements are about resisting how things are, thinking they should be different, and wanting them to be other.

Likewise, rumination and worry, so much a part of depression and anxiety, may be viewed as thought behaviors designed to get away from, or resolve, these difficult states, as if one might think oneself out of them. A contemplative dialogue gently brings attention to and an awareness of participants' difficulty, resistance, and mental elaboration. In this way he facilitates an understanding that by being with and exploring these difficult states from the practice of mindfulness, emotional flexibility, and resilience is supported and reinforced.

As an illustration, the following excerpt takes place after a mindfulness practice working specifically with a difficulty in session 5 ("Allowing and Letting Be").

*Participant:* My boss told me I had to do extra work on a project, and I started to panic.

*Teacher:* So was this what came up in the practice? (locating the participant in the practice)

*Participant:* Yes. I started to feel anxious, with tension in my jaw and a knot in my stomach.

*Teacher:* And then what happened? (tracking)

*Participant:* I stayed with the sensations in my body and used the breath to be with them. I noticed, more sting wasn't added to the situation, and I realized that while something may not be made better, we can make it not worse.

*Teacher:* So you were able to stay with the challenging sensations of anxiety and tension in the body. And then as you were able to be with that, you recognized it wasn't going away, but you could hold it without making it worse. (reinforcing the practices of turning toward difficulty, being present for it, and allowing and staying with it, without exacerbation)

Here, the teacher is checking with the participant that this reflection came up in the practice just completed. He asks for further observations about experience, reinforcing the participant's ability to track and stay with it, cultivating equanimity in the face of challenging moments.

The next example demonstrates a teacher helping participants be with difficulty in an embodied and experiential way, reflecting the themes that everything changes and

passes and that we personalize events. We tend to want to reduce uncertainty and control change. This can show up when a participant talks about his or her depression.

*Participant:* I will always be depressed, and I will never get better. I'm a depressive. (This will be a key moment for the teacher because it highlights the fixed nature of view. There are many ways a teacher may respond to this. One way might be to externalize thoughts from self.)

*Teacher:* That's a compelling thought. Hmm. What else were you aware of in the practice?

*Participant:* (pauses and looks confused and thoughtful) I noticed I felt sad, and my shoulders and chest were tight.

*Teacher:* Okay, so there was some thinking, some sadness, and body sensations. And then what happened? (deconstructing experience into components)

*Participant:* And then the instruction guided us to attend to the entire body. And my shoulders felt less tight.

*Teacher:* Oh, so it shifted? (reinforcing change, impermanence)

Mindfulness helps us to internalize and embody impermanence. Here, the teacher is bringing awareness to the changing nature of attention, senses, and sensations. Participants are encouraged to pay attention to the range of sensations (tracking), to describe them (exploration), and to notice when they change, if they do, and when they don't. They can then begin to reflect on how such knowledge helps to decrease suffering. They can begin to discover by paying close attention to their direct experience that they can lessen the primacy of any one sensation and that everything is in flux, whether this speaks to changing intensity, severity, or duration. The awareness of impermanence can become a source of hope and reduce the tendency to perseverate or elaborate on problems that cannot be solved through ruminative thinking.

The contemplative nature of inquiry will also illustrate the problematic nature of a fixed sense of self. "That's just the way I am," is a common refrain. While it can be argued that an "I" is a necessary vehicle to express ourselves and to navigate the world with coherence, it becomes problematic (as outlined in earlier chapters) when identified with too closely. A fixed view of self reduces possibilities for change or for developing more skillful ways of interacting with the world. Seeing through this rigid lens in which experience is personalized, "He looked at me because I did something wrong," or "She didn't speak to me because she's jealous," means that it is easy to miss how frequently

reality is actually a series of interpretations or constructs dependent upon the context in which we find ourselves. Such a view is narrow and is usually “all about me.”

Sometimes a situation really is about the individual, but often people are immersed in their own thoughts and emotions. Their reactions have nothing to do with us. This tendency to personalize is alienating and isolating. In addition, a sense of self is contingent upon conditions (Batchelor, 1998), meaning our view of who we believe ourselves to be is dependent upon what happens to us. Mindfulness practices and reflecting upon them through inquiry helps our participants see that who they believe themselves to be may in fact be a much more fluid rather than fixed notion.

Within the context of inquiry, the teacher also listens for those moments when participants reflect on the commonality rather than the personal nature of their experience. Participants come to realize they are not alone and nor are their problems necessarily specific to them. There is often relief in the recognition that their conditions are not a moral failing but part of what it is to be human.

This means that as a teacher listens to the participants' reflections, he will guide them to become more aware of personalizing experience and highlight when they aren't. One example of this is when participants are getting lost in storytelling or explanations about why they are doing what they're doing, as in a participant who says, “I was so tired and sleepy in this body scan and my husband has been snoring so much, so I thought, *Well, why not let go, relax, and fall asleep?* I feel like I missed out, and I didn't do a good job in the meditation.”

Teachers can assist participants to decrease their narrative by helping them to label emotions and describe sensations as a means to decenter from self as a fixed entity. This cultivates a view of self as an ongoing process or collection of thoughts, emotions, body sensations, behaviors, or impulses to act. In the above example, the teacher will respond by bringing the participant back to the experience of the body scan, by replying, “So, sleepiness was present and then some thoughts about your husband's snoring and some disappointment and judgment about not doing a good job.”

Identifying when a participant expresses a shifting view of self will be another focus of the teacher's attention in addition to listening for the universality of experience. For example, in a review of the weekly home practice, a participant says, “I usually really hate the body scan and think I can't do it. I suck at meditation. In fact, during the week, I would turn on the recording and get up after ten minutes. But today, I was able to pay attention to some of the guidance and thought, *That wasn't so bad. Maybe I can learn this, and if it's hard, that's okay.*” The teacher might comment, “Oh, so when you were at home, you had thoughts about how you can't meditate and harsh judgments, and today you had a kinder, more accepting view about what might be possible for you.”

The inquiry into and deconstruction of experience using the various modules of the MBCT program reveal how ordinary we are. We are neither so horrible as we suspected or so wonderful as we may have thought (although the latter is not a common problem for those who are depressed or very anxious), and there is a great relief (and reduction in suffering) in letting go of both sides of our self-importance. We can stop

holding so tightly to our sense of self and sense of lack (Loy, 2000), worry, dissatisfaction, judgment of ourselves, others and the world, or insatiable wanting.

## In Closing

Inquiry assists participants to reflect on experience and develop an observational stance with meta-awareness of difficult mind and mood states that promote the disidentification with a fixed sense of self. Cultivating meta-awareness and insight leads to a view of the self as process, one that is responsive, flexible, and adaptable. Decentering is essential for attention and emotional and behavioral regulation. This ability to lessen the attachment to personal narrative and instead articulate experience without identifying with it or automatically reacting to it, brings insight and wisdom. This then allows for intentional skillful responses and actions. Teacher and participant become more skilled at identifying habitual moments of reactivity, leading to more choice in dealing with challenging experiences.

As a contemplative dialogue, inquiry is a relational conversation that has its roots in mindfulness-based principles. It entails being completely present to the experience of another, maintaining flexibility with respect to an agenda exemplified in each session of the MBCT program. It is supported by the guidance of a teacher who is able to be in this mindful interaction with curiosity and compassion. To this end, while a structure is useful to provide a frame of reference for the teacher, ultimately inquiry is experiential, requiring the teacher to step into the unknown, to be open and flexible with respect to whatever his participants offer, whether painful, difficult, joyful, or dull. He embodies the practice of inquiry, present to his own experience and his participants in every moment. Herein lies a taste of freedom that comes from the exploration and acceptance of the full range of experience and the attention and emotion regulation that is facilitated by this contemplative dialogue.

In the next chapter, we focus on considerations for teacher development from initial to advanced training for maintaining competence and beyond.