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# Experiences of Mindful Education: Phenomenological Analysis of MBCT Exercises in a Graduate Class Context<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper uses phenomenological psychology both as a qualitative inquiry and a pedagogic tool in order to understand how graduate students experience the exercises of the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy program in a classroom setting. This understanding is necessary for both teachers and researchers of contemplative pedagogy to ensure that students are helped and not harmed by these practices, as well as to tailor teacher responses to the plurality of individual experience. Furthermore, it aids students in becoming aware of and articulating the changes they are undergoing through contemplative practices. This paper shares summaries of the autophenomenologies of three participants which are then interpreted by the research team. These idiographic descriptions are examined on four themes: 1) textures of attention, 2) “using” mindfulness to relax, 3) normative consciousness, and 4) pedagogical dangers and process. The analysis suggests that mindful education needs to take care in understanding the limits of our ability to express matters concerning the subtleties of how we pay attention, consider the complex interplay in non-clinical populations between “being mode” and “doing mode,” and how that connects to our interpretation of “non-judgment” in mindfulness.*

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2 Names are written in the traditional Japanese order with surname first.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper uses a phenomenological approach to examine *how* graduate students experienced the exercises of the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) program in a classroom setting. It aims to answer two questions: How do students experience mindful education? How can teachers best understand the lived experience of their students as they go through these exercises?

The contemporary (clinical/secular) idea of “mindfulness” took off with Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), eventually gaining a strong foothold in psychotherapy and finding its way into formal education. We now have various programs and associations incorporating mindfulness from Pre-K to school age children and to universities and graduate schools. One major shift that occurred with the transplantation of mindfulness from monasteries and meditation centers to educational settings is that teaching mindfulness is no longer restricted to meditators with a lifetime of experience, an extended period of apprenticeship, and an oral tradition community they are immersed in. Teachers and professors, often with only a workshop or two under their belts, are beginning to teach mindfulness—a duty/privilege that comes with many uncertainties: “Am I even teaching this right?” “Are my students learning contemplative practices in the right way?” “What are my students actually going through in my classes?”

## RELATED LITERATURE: RESPONDING TO TEACHER UNCERTAINTY

We see the above questions in research on mindful education. For example, Maloney et al. (2016, pp. 318-319) found that teachers of the MindUP program often “felt the training they received was not sufficient to feel comfortable to implement the program.” The program was revised and training improved in response to these comments, but similar responses from teachers remained.

While part of this uncertainty is a matter of training, another part of it is a matter of practice. As Barbezat and Bush (2014, p. 67) strongly recommend, “There is no effective way to teach contemplative practices without practicing them yourself.” Deepening one’s own practice, hav-

ing an intimate familiarity with the exercises you are teaching your students, and having a theoretical grasp of how mindfulness works all likely contribute to more confidence in one's teaching.

However, perhaps there is a part of this issue that is irreducible to the teacher's own preparation, but is instead about feedback and understanding the experience of students. This *two-way* pedagogic relationship is essential to all educational theory and practice. No matter how long you meditate or how much you have mastered the practice and theory of the body scan, if you overlook your student crying in the corner, if she never gets to communicate to you that she is having traumatic flashbacks, then the doubt "Are my students learning contemplative practice in the right way?" is not only relevant but necessary.

We suggest that there is a difficulty particular to mindful education: this form of education has to do with learning a particular *way* of paying attention. While we spend a lot of time arguing about *whether or not* one is paying attention, we spend little time articulating "*in what way* do we pay attention?" Do non-specialists have the vocabulary and the metacognition for this sort of articulation? This makes it very difficult to get feedback for mindfulness. Students may not realize that they are misunderstanding instructions. Or they may not know how to express what they are experiencing (hence resorting to vague descriptions, like "It was boring," or "I didn't get it").

Thanks to mindfulness having passed through clinical psychology in its process of translation into education, there are various instruments used to measure mindfulness: the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory, the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills, the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale, the Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, et cetera (see Baer et al., 2009). For example, the Five-Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire has questions like "When I'm walking, I deliberately notice the sensations of my body moving." "I make judgments about whether my thoughts are good or bad." These questions are usually answered on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (pp. 165-166).

While questionnaires like these are of *statistical* value in understanding the change in mindfulness of particular *populations*, we argue that it is difficult to use them to understand individual students idiographically. The understanding of each question differs from student to student,

and these measures suffer the usual issues of self-report scales. Furthermore, paradoxical results are possible. For example, the more mindful a student is, the more they may be aware of taking a judgmental attitude toward their thoughts. Therefore, while these measures can suggest *conversation points* between teacher and student, we argue they are difficult to use as is.

Corollary to this, most of the research on mindful education has to do with its outcomes (see Lyons & DeLange, 2016). While this might help convince a teacher of the effectivity of a method on a *population*, it tells nothing of how *individual* students may be affected by an intervention, or how to respond to students *during* the process of mindful education.

Some researchers (Maloney et al., 2016, p. 321) have suggested the need to consider these individual voices: “There is a tendency in outcome research to treat young people as if they are ‘passive objects who are acted on by the adult world.’” In response to this criticism, Maloney et al. include responses from program participant satisfaction surveys. For example, Maloney et al. (2016, pp. 324-325) write:

...one student mentioned, “sometimes I would get bored or I couldn’t calm down enough.” . . . This observation may indicate that if the Core Practice is introduced or perceived as a method for finding mental stillness, rather than a non-judgmental observational practice, it could undermine young people’s desire to explore and investigate their inner lives.

For responding to individual students, such comments are of much greater value than quantitative measures of a population. However, these simple open requests for feedback still have their limits, because they tend to highlight merely what the student perceives to be something they were satisfied or dissatisfied with and thus miss the experiences in-between and their interconnections. For example, a student may have gotten moderately relaxed through an exercise, seen this as a “baseline” of “how mindfulness should work,” and thus had nothing remarkable to say—completely overlooking how the student (mistakenly) perceived the practice “as a method for finding mental stillness, rather than a non-judgmental observational practice.”

Additionally, such an understanding is crucial in an intervention that may be exerting unseen effects on a student's psyche. As Maloney et al. (2009, p. 329) themselves suggest, "Because school-based MBIs are intended for universal populations, it is important to explore whether the programs are appropriate for *all* students to ensure that they do no harm, a fundamental ethical guideline for mindfulness practice." Their particular concern is "iatrogenic effects . . . mindfulness training causing harm or distress" (p. 328).

Lindahl et al. (2017) studied Buddhist-derived meditation practices and found that there are various psychological difficulties that are experienced across a wide range of domains: "cognitive, perceptual, affective, somatic, conative, sense of self, and social" (p. 1). More worrisome is that:

...the vast majority (>75%) of meditation studies do not actively assess adverse effects [2, 54]; ... passive monitoring is thought to underestimate AE prevalence by more than 20-fold [58]. A few MBI researchers have started to actively monitor AEs either through questionnaires or through clinician interviews [59–61]. However, these are typically limited to serious AEs (life-threatening or fatal events) or "deterioration" on pre-existing clinical outcomes that require clinical attention, such as increased depression or suicidality. These AEs, as well as traumatic flashbacks, are now listed in the MBI guidelines under "risks to participants" [62]. (p. 4)

For those exposed to traditional religious forms of mindfulness, this is hardly surprising, as there is much literature on what is called "*makyô*" and other meditation-induced psychological challenges (see Nishihira, 2014). However, with the secularization of mindfulness, this link seems to have been severed; it receives almost no mention in Williams et al.'s discussion of MBCT, and Barbezat and Bush's primer on contemplative pedagogy.

Given these risks, it is essential that teachers regularly check in on how their students are experiencing these practices and overcome the difficulty meditators have in making sense of and articulating the process and results of various exercises. In response to these challenges, this

research employed a descriptive and interpretative phenomenological method. Through this, the researchers hope to not only understand the experiences of these particular students, but to suggest a way for teachers (and perhaps students themselves) to have a better understanding of student experience in order to better tailor the learning experience.

The use of a phenomenological approach to understand mindfulness has precedent in the work of Grenard (2008), who applied this to *kōan* meditation in Zen Buddhism; Albrecht (2016), who applied this method for mindfulness teachers; and Cotter-Lockard (2008), who applied it to a variety of meditators. It also has interesting parallels with Bentz and Shapiro's (1998) idea of "mindful inquiry," this time applied by students to themselves. However, our research is relatively unique in presenting phenomenology as an analytic, evaluative, and pedagogic method simultaneously.

## METHOD

This study closely examines how graduate students experienced various mindfulness exercises conducted in a classroom setting. This graduate class was taught by the lead researcher over one semester (1.5 hours per week, 15 weeks). There were 14 students who applied for this class on the basis of their personal and research interests—they were not in the class for the sake of receiving therapy for problems per se. In this class, we learned Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) by carrying out the 8-week MBCT course (see Fig. 1) while reading Williams et al.'s *The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness* (2017) together with Nishihira Tadashi's *The Dynamism of No-Mind (Mushin no dainamizumu: "shinayakasa" no keifu)*, (2014).

In order to closely examine the experiences of these students, the researchers used a combination of descriptive and interpretative phenomenological psychology. Phenomenological psychology began from phenomenological philosophy and has evolved into a whole family of methods, with varying emphases from description to interpretation to narrative. (See Langdridge, 2007, for an overview of these various approaches.) However, what they share in common is a focus on understanding experience *from within*.

Week 1	Body scan, mindfulness in daily living
Week 2	Body scan, pleasant events calendar, ten-minute sitting with awareness of breath
Week 3	Mindful standing yoga, mindfulness of breath and body, yoga, unpleasant events calendar, three-minute breathing space
Week 4	Mindful standing yoga, mindfulness of breath and body, awareness of pleasant and unpleasant feelings, three-minute breathing space
Week 5	Mindfulness of breath and body, exploring a difficulty, three-minute breathing space, opening the body door
Week 6	Mindfulness of breath and body, mindfulness of sounds and thoughts, three-minute breathing space, opening the thought door
Week 7	Alternate 1 daily meditation of choice (no CD, 40 minutes a day) with mindfulness of breath and body, mindfulness of sounds and thoughts, three-minute breathing space, opening the action door
Week 8	The rest of your life

*Figure 1. Eight-Week Mindfulness Program (Williams et al., 2017, p. 234)*

As we see in Brown and Cordon (2009, pp. 65-66), there is a fundamental link between phenomenology as a method and mindfulness itself:

First, in both traditions the experience of what is occurring in the present becomes of paramount interest . . . Second, both propose that this presence is entered through a suspension of the habitual or automatized way of processing experience in favor of an open attentiveness that simply processes what is occurring moment by moment. . . . Third and relatedly, as an experiential state, this attention is actively receptive to what enters the mind rather than placed in the service of cognitive



manipulation of that mental content. Fourth, both systems of thought propose that presence can be cultivated (lengthened, deepened, etc.) through practice . . .

In other words, doing phenomenology *is* an exercise in mindfulness, and not merely a means of understanding mindfulness. This means that it is not merely of value as a form of feedback, but as a formative assessment in itself. Interestingly, Nicholls (2019, p. 10) has argued the converse as well, that mindfulness can aid one in carrying out phenomenological research.

This class combined the analytic suitability of phenomenology with the contemplative pedagogic value of phenomenology by using it as a final student project—akin to what Barbezat and Bush (2014, p. 110) call “contemplative writing.” The class discussed Howitt’s (2016) explanation of phenomenology (Chapter 12) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Chapter 13) as a guide to the basic attitude in describing and interpreting their experiences. Each student then examined their experiences qualitatively, using descriptive phenomenological psychology. In this “autophenomenology,” they carefully described their experiences of two or more exercises, going into detail into the sensations, feelings, and thoughts involved in the phenomenon. They were explicitly told to “bracket” any interpretation, judgment, or explanation of the phenomenon in this first phase. *After* this descriptive phase, they were asked to look at their experience interpretatively, sharing what they *thought* about these practices.

The separation of description from interpretation via a strong notion of “bracketing” comes from Amedeo Giorgi’s Husserlian approach. Whether or not such a bracketing is even possible is a matter of debate in both philosophy and psychology (Howitt, 2016, p. 315). However, such a separation is pedagogically *useful* in that it provides an avenue to describe experience without explaining what it means. Due to the nature of mindfulness, we cannot presume that students (or anyone for that matter) fully understand the changes taking place within one’s consciousness, and so many experiences do not “make sense” to the experiencer. However, after description, the interpretative phase allows the student to attempt to make sense of their experience as both a mode of self-expression and as a means of applying their theoretical learnings on the topic.

After these were submitted, three of the students were chosen for the level of detail and insight of their descriptions. Another factor in their selection was for variation in their experiences of the potentials and difficulties of mindfulness. These three students participated as *co-researchers*—not only sharing their descriptions but examining and interpreting the descriptions of others and responding to these interpretations as well.

All the co-researchers were Japanese graduate students. There were two male and one female student. Two were in their 20s, one in their 60s. Two had no mindful meditation experience (but some yoga or theater-based practices), and one had seven years of training in methods similar to mindfulness. Participants will be referred to as A, B, and C. Because gender will not be addressed as a factor in this study, each participant was assigned a random gender for pronoun use. Despite being an autophenomenology, we wish to maintain some degree of anonymity of the participants by withholding identifying details that will indicate which co-researcher is which participant.

The descriptions they submitted were analyzed primarily via Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology. The descriptions were broken up into "meaning units," which were tabulated. Each meaning unit was condensed, removing the details deemed unessential via "imaginative variation." Various meaning units were then connected and contrasted via their psychological significance. (Giorgi's method proceeds to abstract the "structure/essence" of the phenomenon, but this phase of analysis was deemed unnecessary for our primarily idiographic purpose, and thus omitted.)

Interpretation was carried out by the lead researcher, by the participants themselves (in the interpretative phase), and by other co-researchers analyzing the description. These interpretations were then shared with the participant in order to corroborate our interpretations. This process was then put together for the final version "significance" column. For an example, see Fig. 2.

Original Text	Description by Meaning Unit	Significance
<p>I think I concentrated my attention particularly on the expanding and contracting of my belly. When I focused on my breathing, at first, my feelings seemed to become lighter. But as I realized that my mood got lighter, my mood worsened with the anxiety of impending tasks. I felt even worse because even though I was practicing mindfulness, I wasn't feeling better.</p>	<p>3. Mindful of the sensation of breathing in his abdomen, his mood improved. But just as he noticed this improvement, he would remember his various tasks and feel down again, and this went back and forth.</p>	<p>3 + 4 + 5 A alternated between mindfulness of breath, where his attention would shift away from his tasks and a sense of self-critique and compulsion to complete tasks. Mindfulness was an effort to forget/reject a negative feeling. (Doing-mode vs. another doing mode.) The result was a negative spiral. Co-researcher: Possible negative spiral in feedback between body and negative thoughts?</p>
<p>"I must concentrate more!" And I brought my consciousness to the movements of my belly. And when I focused on the movements of my belly, at first I would forget my tasks and was able to feel the movements of my belly and my breathing. But when I would realize "the I that had forgotten the tasks," at that instant, "a feeling of blaming this self that had realized the self that had forgotten [his] tasks" and this "flusteredness [<i>aseri</i>] that I needed to the tasks that were drawing close to their deadline," and these made me very uncomfortable.</p>	<p>4. He would will himself to focus on breathing and his mood would improve, having forgotten his tasks. But realizing this "neglectful self" would make him feel worse. He feels this as coming from a feeling of blaming himself (for realizing this neglectful self) and a compulsion to complete the tasks.</p>	<p>Co-researcher: Intense engagement with "problem" results in self-critique.</p>
<p>The mood then was like being in an antlion pit (<i>ari jigoku</i>), and I got the sense that the more I squirmed "Let's improve my mood, forget these tasks" the more I was dragged down.</p>	<p>5. He had the sensation of being in an "antlion pit," getting worse the more he tried to improve his mood and forget his tasks.</p>	<p>Co-researcher: Antlion = rumination (focus on symptoms of distress and its causes)? Participant: How much of this was sheer degree of discomfort? (It may be beyond resources and experience of subject to deal with problem directly.)</p>

Figure 2. Extract from Analysis of Participant A.

## RESULTS

In this section, we begin with a summary of each co-researcher/participant's experiences as well as an analysis of the individual experiences. (For brevity, we will refer to them merely as participants.) We end this section with an analysis of themes that connect across the three participants.

### **Participant A: Mindfulness of Breath and Mindfulness of Sounds and Thoughts**

First, we examine participant A's description of his experience of the "mindfulness of breath" exercise, which began in week 2. When he did this exercise, A relates that he was already in a low mood—it was late at night and he had many deadlines and other stressors—"And so, in a hurry [*awatete*] I started focusing my consciousness on my breathing." While at first mindfulness of the sensations of breathing improved his mood, he would notice this improvement and that he had forgotten his tasks and would feel down again. "I felt even worse because even though I was practicing mindfulness, I wasn't feeling better. 'I must concentrate more!' And I brought my consciousness to the movements in my belly." This cycle of brief improvement, remembering (and self-critique/blame that he even remembered), and feeling worse repeated, to the point that he felt he was in an "antlion pit," feeling progressively worse. Realizing this, he felt there was no point to doing this exercise now and went to bed.

Interpreting this experience, we found that his description suggests—"in a hurry..." "I must concentrate more..."—an attempt to fix his stressful situation by "using" MBCT to relax. The participant himself corroborated this: "When one does mindfulness of the breath, one is asked to be open to uncomfortable feelings. And yet this time, I used [*katsuyô*] mindfulness practice to change discomfort into comfort."

This use of MBCT as a way to avoid discomfort seemed to result in this cycle of feeling better, remembering his tasks, and then feeling worse. This may be interpreted as a "rebound" of the emotion that was pushed away without being addressed. Furthermore, the feedback loop between the body (sensations of stress) and the mind (ruminating on these sensations), resulted in increased awareness paradoxically making participant A feel worse—an interpretation he himself corroborated. Part

of this feeling worse also came with self-criticism—that he had forgotten his tasks, as well as that he had gotten “distracted from practice” by remembering that he had forgotten—that was added to the rebound of feeling stressed.

The second experience A related was of the “mindfulness of sounds and thoughts” exercise. One night, he decided to do this practice not in his room but at the university—the change in location he felt to be quite influential to creating a sense of novelty in his practice. After doing “mindfulness of the breath” and “mindfulness of breath and body,” he proceeded to be mindful of sounds, and he noticed many sounds that he would not otherwise hear at home. He also noticed the absence of sounds he would otherwise hear—sounds made by his family at home—which made him feel terribly lonely. “While it was fun [*tanoshii*] to hear things I usually don’t at home, I realized that I was completely alone here, and became very lonely....I felt as if in this world, there is really no one but me.” He continued to feel this loneliness when the exercise shifted to mindfulness of thoughts, where he watched over it [*nagameta*]. “Doing that, I didn’t feel anything special toward this being lonely, I was just thinking, ‘Ah, I’m feeling lonely, am I not?’”

We interpreted this experience and found two noteworthy themes. First was novelty, which A repeatedly connected to a feeling of “happiness.” (The word “*tanoshii*” has lighter connotations including “fun.”) It came at the start of the description (when he discussed the venue of his sit) and at the end (when he discussed how he feels about this new way of facing loneliness), and seemed to suggest a certain presence, unlike the usual “change-blindness” of being in an automatic mode of going through life. His careful description of the sounds he heard showed a heightened attunement to the senses and to consciousness, arising perhaps from both the novelty and the preparation from the two previous mindfulness exercises.

Second, A suggested what for him was a newfound attitude toward negative feelings. Instead of trying to alleviate or distract himself from a strong sense of loneliness, he turned toward it and watched it. But he did not get hooked by this feeling of loneliness—by going off on an inner narrative of being isolated, for instance. Instead, he writes in his self-anal-

ysis, “It was my sense/feeling, but I felt it as if it were someone else’s [*bet-sujin no hito no*] sense/feeling, and I was able to watch it just flowing.” He also added that this watching was like when “gazing at a child [one is] carrying.” At first, it involves being able to look at the *feeling* without necessarily getting caught up in it reactively. This slowly evolves to what the participant explains as a sense of gazing at the *feeling self* without a sense of being identified with it, but at the same time with a sense of compassion or warmth (see Gilbert and Tirch, 2009). These two can be seen as progressively deeper phases of dis-identification.

However, interestingly, in his self-analysis, participant A compared this experience with the previous one—contrasting how he ran from the negative experience in the first description, but not in the second. What we see here is, in his self-interpretation, a certain “normative consciousness” of how mindfulness is “supposed to be”—something we also saw right when he decided to quit his “mindfulness of the breath” practice. The complex question of “being mode and doing mode” and their relationship to “correct mindfulness” will remain a question for us throughout this paper.

### **Participant B: Body Scan, Mindfulness of Breath, and Mindfulness of Sounds and Thoughts**

Participant B related six descriptions, but we focus on three. First, we turn to her experience of the “body scan” exercise. The body scan was the first exercise, and she related a sense of tension surrounding the novelty of this experience. (Later on, she shared her fear that this might be some form of “mind control” or brainwashing, which she felt uneasy with.) When she closed her eyes, she was able to relax for a while. But then, various thoughts started to pop up, and she found herself unable to let them go. She also could not focus on any one aspect of her experience, finding it hard to focus on various parts of the body, and often becoming quite sleepy. Additionally, she had difficulty understanding what the audio guidance was trying to say. (Later on, she detailed that she could not even understand what it would mean to “become aware of a body part.”) “The meditation ended with [me] in a state of confusion.”

In our interpretation of this experience, one thing that pulled together various aspects of her experience was the fact that she was so new to MBCT. We saw this in her preconceptions, in her confusion, and in her difficulty in understanding the audio guidance. She later confirmed this confusion as to what precisely MBCT was trying to do, how to do it, et cetera. Perhaps part of her newness to the practice are the various challenges that seemed to make practice difficult—tension, confusion, difficulty focusing, sleepiness, et cetera. While mindfulness is not something that can be fully explained conceptually, we see here that the conceptual understanding of mindfulness (or the lack thereof) may play a key role in one's ability to commit to the practice.

Second, she related her experience of the “mindfulness of the breath” exercise. While trying to focus on the sensations of breathing, she found that various thoughts about work or other life issues would arise and take her attention. Alternately, she would become sleepy. “My mind was scattered [*kakusan*] and wouldn't seem to come together [*hitotsu ni matomaranai*].” She would start to worry if this was the right way to sit or not and become anxious. However, at times, when she tried to think about something positive/comfortable [*kokochi yoi*], nothing would come up. And she relates the following sense:

It [positive/comfortable experience] might be now. The comfort of nothing coming up. Rather than having some matter, realizing a sense of resting in silence, the joy of being able to forget. ... The joy that there isn't anything in particular. The joy that I am not perturbed [*kodawaranai*] by anything.

Interpreting this experience, we saw that much of it was similar to her experience of the body scan. However, some features of her experience are clearer here. First, she seemed to be critical of having a “scattered mind,” and had a negative view toward the chaotic movement of thoughts. Looking back on this experience, she noted how she sees MBCT as a practice of “organizing” (*seiri*) one's thoughts and feelings. These two metaphors for the mind formed a pair—a discomfort with *scatteredness*, a desire to *organize*.

Connected to this, she experienced a worry that she was not practicing “properly.” This also connects with being new to MBCT, but we see another facet here—normative consciousness. Later on, she corroborates this: “‘Attachment [*shūchaku*] to thoughts’ arises; And I have a self-critical consciousness that arises: ‘thinking is no good [*dame*]!’” She explains, “In my head, I understand that MBCT is beyond normativity and value-judgment, but unconsciously, [I] was bound by my norms; [I] carried out a value-judgment...” While Kabat-Zinn and Williams et al. deliberately focus on this non-normative approach, participant B seemed to have a hard time adjusting to this approach. In the last statement, we see a paradoxical self-criticism that one is still self-critical—perhaps showing that “non-normativity” itself can become a norm.

Perhaps connected to this desire to “organize what is scattered” is her indication of a positive experience of realizing that perhaps this very moment might be what comfort is. On one hand, this was one of her first accounts of “feeling good” in a practice, and perhaps she was getting more settled in her practice. But we also saw that the emphasis of this was a form of quietude and focus, rather than an open awareness. While MBCT suggests the need to be open to one’s discomfort, what role do moments of quietude and relaxation play in the process of learning this openness?

Third, we turn to participant B’s experience of “mindfulness of sounds and thoughts.” In this exercise, when she turned to the sounds she could hear, she felt a deep sense of novelty. “I could see the world, once again, in a new way.” She was able to focus on sounds, making her thoughts feel less scattered. Then, turning to awareness of thoughts, she found that whereas previously, thoughts seemed so hard to grasp, she was able to feel it settle “as a clump [*katamari*] existing in the mind.” Eventually, the urge to grasp [*toraeru*] thoughts weakened, and she was able to watch them with a sense of distance as they arose and dispersed. “I felt that I noticed the sensation of grasping thoughts and feelings.”

Interpreting this, we saw a facet continuing from the previous two descriptions—a move to organize “scattered thoughts” through focus. The participant explained that by moving her attention from a place other than thoughts, she could effectively “sever [*tachikiru*] attachment to



thoughts.” In her subsequent interpretation of her own experience, she connected this to her experience in her career, which requires a certain level-headedness despite pressure. However, she was uncomfortable with this being interpreted as “escape [*tôhi*],” saying:

The challenge [in my career] was how to control myself when uncertain and uncomfortable things suddenly come up. This was not an escape or forgetting of suffering, but a habit of controlling and dealing with [*shori suru*] uncomfortable thoughts and feelings in my own way. Through a method of response [I] called “mind setting” [*maindo setto*], I looked at uncomfortable thoughts and feelings from a different angle and actively tried to overcome them.

What we see here is that participant B had her own way of dealing with her problems. While different from what MBCT prescribes, it was not a simplistic evasion either. In the previous description, we interpreted this as seeking “quietude.” This is clearer when we see how she explains “non-attachment to thought” as “calming down [*ochitsuite*], relaxed, neutrally being able to gaze at one’s self.” Practitioners of CBT might recognize this approach as closer to Beck’s Cognitive Therapy or Ellis’ Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy—active relaxation and disputing problematic thought patterns. This approach has assumptions that are distinct from those of MBCT. But at the same time, it is important to note that we had no indication this “defense” was counter-productive for the participant herself.

However, the last part of her experience, where her urge to grasp her thoughts begins to soften, becomes crucial yet difficult to interpret. What we saw here is an easing of the control and focus of her “mind setting” approach. Later on, she explained that this felt like a release (*kaihô*) from her normativity and tension/intensity (*kinchôkan*). Might this be a shift to a less relaxation-centered and more accepting “open-awareness?” What might this tell us about the relationship of active relaxation and its relationship to mindfulness?

### Participant C: Body Scan

Participant C shared descriptions of three exercises, but due to the detail of these descriptions, we focus on one. In her description of her experience of the “body scan” exercise, C shared what she went through in detail—from the beginning of the audio guide and the gradual process of quieting down of her body. She noted how the audio guide encourages practitioners to stay awake during this practice (which is generally done lying down), and “when I heard that, I noticed in my mind that the resolve [ketsui] ‘let’s develop [shujû] [our practice] without sleeping’ had arisen, and became conscious of abiding by that resolve.” As she observed her breathing, she felt her breath become more subtle. She felt various “gross” (in the sense of rough, *sodai*) sensations like nervousness, itching, and pain, but these became finer and undifferentiated. The guide suggested that one feel as if one were melting into the mat. With this, she felt her heart, blood flow, and muscles relax. But then she thought, “It seems my brain is processing the audio guide without my awareness and influencing my body.” She scanned her body and decided to be more conscious about the audio guide. Then, following the guide and shifting awareness to her left toes, she searched for feeling in her toes and had the realization, “The toes I am trying to be aware of do not exist.” She felt this was a great insight (*dôsetsu*). Her belly and spine, particularly in the area below her navel had a spreading sense of relaxation. Her face relaxed and it felt like her face was connected to her back. With focus, she began to feel her feet. But she had an insight that “her material body and the fine sensations may not be on the same dimension.” She started to remember and got the urge to recollect a similar experience, but she went back to focusing on meditating, telling herself, “This is meditation. Let’s return to practice.” Then, the guided meditation came to an end, but she continued meditating with no particular focus. During this “extended sit,” she felt a vibration that could have been sensory or cognitive: a sense of flows and changes in consciousness. Her consciousness felt like it was decreasing, then all of a sudden, “consciousness expanded, as if the resolution (*kaizôdo*) of sensing increased.” There appeared to be a space between the decrease and the expansion. Toward the end,

consciousness shifted to background, as if watching the surface of a river “from the river bottom.” Thoughts and sensations rose and fell, like random bubbles on a swamp. Finally, realizing she needed to use the bathroom, she slowly transitioned back and ended her practice.

In our interpretation of participant C’s description, a key factor was her extensive experience in meditative practice. Because of her active involvement in her religion, she has a regular meditative practice that has continued for almost a decade. And while MBCT was not her main practice, there are similarities between her practice and MBCT, and she also has more theoretical and practical MBCT experience than the other participants. However, it is not our objective to demonstrate which of the particularities of her experience are “explained” by her relatively advanced level in meditation, but rather to offer this as a possible factor to consider.

We draw our attention to several aspects of her experience. First, we noticed that participant C had a very clear engagement with the audio guide. She was always aware of what it was saying. She generally did as it suggested—and with a very active sense of “resolve.” But there were times when she was critical of it, like when she felt it may be unduly influencing her. But interestingly, she was also not completely bound by the audio guide—because she kept on meditating even after it ended. From our discussions, this seems to reflect the attitude of someone who has a solid meditation practice but is doing a guided meditation that is not identical to what she usually does—a mix of curiosity, willingness, and criticality. Of course, this also reflected her personality to an extent.

Second, as is clear by the level of detail of the descriptions above, she had a very high level of attention to what is going on—from the audio guide, to her thoughts and feelings, to fragments of thoughts and feelings, to bodily sensations, to sensations (like blood flow) that many people are completely oblivious too, even if prompted.

Third, while being very aware of what is going on, one sensed a “distance,” a dis-identification from these various experiences. We saw this when she had certain thoughts (which she sometimes acted on, and sometimes did not), but she was able to let them go and return to the practice. We also saw this when “gross” sensations started to become

undifferentiated, the realization that her toes “do not exist,” and the sense of the material body and fine sensations not being on the same plane.

Fourth, and a more complex point: one sensed a nuanced relationship with “normative consciousness.” As previously mentioned, “non-judgment” is a core part of MBCT and MBSR. However, reading participant C’s description, it seemed she had a very clear idea of what *ought* to be done. We saw this in her “resolve” not to sleep and in her “critical” stance toward the guide subliminally influencing her. Perhaps her repeatedly labeling certain thoughts as “insights” also shows a form of valuation. This was clearest when she sternly (using the formal ending “*dearu*”) told herself, “This is meditation. Let’s return to practice.” However, is this necessarily the same “judgment” that attaches to or rejects experiences? Or is this “normative consciousness” with a relatively softer touch, that values mindfulness without rejecting the “mindlessness” that flickers in and out of meditation?

This brings us to the peculiar experience participant C describes of consciousness at first weakening, then suddenly, “consciousness expanded, as if the resolution (*kaizōdo*) of sensing increased.” In her self-interpretation, she explained that this was a shift from a consciousness that was more critical of having “stray” thoughts—a consciousness she calls “ego bullying” (*jiga ijime*)—to a consciousness that was without this sort of negativity. What this suggested (and one can very slightly glimpse from the descriptions) is that the early forms of “normative consciousness”—telling oneself not to sleep and get back to meditation—may have had a slightly stronger “judgment” (without necessarily having the same degree of “judgment” that we ordinarily associate with normative consciousness) than the last state of dis-identification and relatively thoroughgoing openness.

## DISCUSSION

The descriptions and analyses above are idiographic: They are meant to describe various possibilities, without necessarily making them representative of a “population.” In order to see certain patterns of possibility and where variations occur, we examine three themes common to the descriptions above.

### **Textures of Attention**

First is the nature of “attention.” In their own words, we have seen participants describe many kinds of awareness—participant B not even understanding what it means to “be aware of a body part,” participant A’s controlling attention, participant B’s attention that focuses and organizes, participant C’s very fine-combed attention where “gross” sensations become “undifferentiated,” dis-identified attention (which all of them showed at one point), participant B’s compassionate attention. Furthermore, the three participants went through great (creative) lengths to come up with ways to express these different kinds of attention.

What these suggest is that one of the challenges of communicating (both talking about and listening about) attention is that not only are people generally unaware of the texture of their attention (and how many textures are even possible), we do not have a shared vocabulary for it. Psychology and philosophy have come up with various neologisms—metacognition, being mode, defusion, self-compassion, intentionality, *Gelassenheit*—but very few students have a clear idea what phenomena these refer to. This also suggests that one of the pedagogic effects of mindfulness is the ability to cultivate an awareness of and vocabulary to communicate the quality of one’s attention, which we see in participants A and B. (C already seems to have had this awareness and vocabulary.)

### **Using Mindfulness to Relax**

The second theme, which was common not only in participants A and B but in the entirety of our class (and in the personal experience of the lead researcher) is the paradoxical tendency of “using MBCT to relax.” Participant A tried to use mindfulness of the breath to destress. Similarly, participant B tried to use MBCT to organize her chaotic thoughts and feelings, to reach a state of quietude (“*ochitsuite*”). We have also seen this discussed in a previous quote from Maloney et al. (2016).

This can be clarified in theory by the concepts of “doing mode” vs. “being mode,” which Williams et al. (2007, p. 40) articulate as follows:

This mode of careful analysis, problem solving judgment, and comparison is aimed at closing the gap

between the way things are and the way we think they should be—at solving perceived problems. Therefore we call it the *doing mode of mind*. (pp. 40-41)

We call it the *being mode* of mind. / We don't only think *about* things, we also experience them directly through the senses. . . . And we can be aware of ourselves experiencing. . . . Furthermore, we can be *aware* of ourselves thinking . . . (p. 46)

When participants A and B try to “use MBCT,” they are paradoxically employing doing mode to try to get to being mode. This is why Kabat-Zinn talks about “non-striving” and Williams et al. suggest, “To pay attention to the here and now, we need intention, not force” (2007, p. 75). However, our research suggests that this particular attitude is very difficult to convey to those new to contemplative practices. The idea of intending without forcing or striving is something that takes time for students to grasp experientially.

The participants suggested that one major factor impeding this is that the very educational system itself (at least in Japan, but I imagine this is true in most countries) is heavily built around “doing mode”—exhibiting competence through one’s growing ability to *solve problems*. Thus, presenting mindfulness as a “class activity” or as “homework” seemed to have given students an added pressure to be competent at it—setting them up to approach being mode through doing mode.

When “doing mode” is directly criticized—as it was in our class and in our co-researcher discussions—an additional difficulty was that, in an educational setting, one cannot presume that “doing mode” is at an impasse. Unlike the populations of MBSR and MBCT, the majority of students are mentally healthy (or undiagnosed, and thus perceiving themselves as healthy) and only a minority are aware of having mental illness. We suggest it is necessary to adjust the rhetoric for being mode in a context that is dominated by the doing mode of (purportedly) healthy students.

### **Normative Consciousness**

A third theme and corollary to doing mode is “normative consciousness.” Participant A decided to stop doing mindfulness of the breath because he

was not doing it the right way. He also compared his two experiences, suggesting that one was closer to what mindfulness ought to be. In participant B, we saw this repeatedly, when she worried that she was not practicing “properly,” or the self-critical feeling that it is bad (“*dame*”) to be distracted by thoughts. We also saw this in her attitude toward her own thoughts (overlapping with the previous theme), which actively tried to “mind-set” in order to deal with “problematic” thoughts and feelings. We also saw this, but with a quite different character, in participant C, when she “resolved” not to sleep, or told herself, “This is meditation. Let’s return to practice,” or when she interpreted these as having a sense of “ego-bullying.”

Mindfulness is defined as “*the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to things as they are*” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 47). What our research suggests is that we need to be very careful with the idea of “non-judgment.” On one hand, as the experiences of participants A and B suggest, it is necessary to have a certain conceptual understanding of how mindfulness “should be,” in order to guide correct practice. Participant A’s decision to stop meditating in his first experience shows that, at least, he recognized that the way he was doing the practice was actually driving him into a negative spiral. This is a form of “judgment.” Participant B’s initial confusion can be seen as a lack of this understanding, making such a judgment impossible. If we misunderstand “non-judgment” to mean “anything goes,” we have no way of knowing if what students are doing is anything near mindful practice!

But how mindfulness “should be” can become a barrier to practice, as we see in the second experience of participant B, or what participant C refers to as “ego bullying.” When we cling too strongly (“fusion”) to the rules of how mindfulness should be, it can become a whip we flagellate ourselves with every time a “stray” thought comes up.

Yet this normative consciousness is not merely something we learn and then later discard. As we see in participant C, normative consciousness can be part of a very mature meditative practice. It sets the direction for the practice, and gets one back on track when one is momentarily derailed. Perhaps this expresses the paradox of “intention works better than force,” but this time in the realm of judgment. “Non-judgment” is not

anything goes, but a guiding intention that accepts whatever comes into experience, while responsively guiding practice.

### **Pedagogical Dangers and Process**

Examining the above themes, we examine two further pedagogical issues. First, there is one possible “iatrogenic” effect of mindful education: Mindfulness is not anything goes—it is the cultivation of a particular way of attention and responding to stress. As suggested in the previous themes, that means that mindfulness is incompatible with a competence-fixated doing mode approach. It is also (partially or fully) incompatible with various “judgmental” approaches to present moment awareness: faith-based refusal to look at certain feelings (like “lust”), active relaxation and calming (as we see in participant B’s “mind setting,” but also in the responses of other students in the class), Ellis-style disputation of irrational thoughts, et cetera. (The latter two are supported by some forms of psychotherapy.) In a non-pathological setting, what is a teacher to do when faced with students with their own ways of coping with stressors that are *not* compatible with mindfulness? Teaching mindfulness can potentially dislodge these (working) forms of coping, leading to (perhaps momentary) increases in stress vulnerability, or making students feel ashamed and invalidated, that their own relationship with their thoughts is “wrong” (non-judgment as a judgment against judgmental thinking, as seen in the case of participant B).

Another pedagogical issue is the need to be aware of a certain “progression” (although not in the normative sense) by which one approaches mindfulness. To what extent is the student ready to let go of “doing mode?” What kind of “normative consciousness” is appropriate for this student’s level of development in contemplative practice? And how much stress is the student ready to open up to mindfully? (This was very clear in our discussions of the “exploring a difficulty” exercise, but also in how they responded to difficult thoughts and feelings coming up in practice.)

### **CONCLUSION**

While it is good that mindfulness is being taught more widely and manualized, this does not mean that we can teach every student identically (even if they are part of the same age group). As we have shown in this



qualitative study, the experience of students greatly varies *individually*—interacting with various stressors, personality traits, coping mechanisms, narratives, and psychological factors with remarkable complexity. Teaching mindfulness in a way that is helpful and *safe* requires an understanding of how students experience mindfulness exercises.

However, given the difficulty of understanding and expressing what goes on in mindfulness practice, regular feedback may not be sufficient. Instead of these, one possibility is the use of autophenomenological exercises where students can first describe and then interpret their experiences. Through these, they can grow in awareness of awareness itself and the vocabulary necessary to express it. And at the same time, teachers can respond to students depending on their own personal experiences, while deepening their understanding of the varieties of contemplative experience.

The results of these exercises can also aid researchers of contemplative pedagogy to have a richer understanding of the realities of contemplative practice and its effects. As we have seen in our analysis above, we learned how mindful education is complicated by the limits of our vocabulary on varieties of “paying attention,” the tension between being vs. doing mode (especially in a school setting), and the complex problem of norms surrounding how we “should” be doing mindfulness exercises.

Further research is necessary to see how this can be integrated not as a final project but as a continuous “phenomenological diary” to provide on-going feedback, and how this phenomenological exercise might contribute to the gains of mindfulness itself through improved teacher response and self-awareness.

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