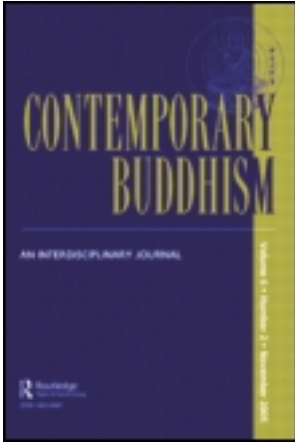


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TEACHING CALM ABIDING MEDITATION TO MENTAL HEALTH WORKERS: A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF VALUING SUBJECTIVITY

Sharn Rocco, Shaun Dempsey and David Hartman

Teaching an eight-week calm abiding meditation course to staff in a Child and Youth Mental Health Service located in a regional Australian city presented a curious meeting of Buddhism with Western culture. This meeting highlighted both the potential benefits and challenges of teaching meditation in the workplace and the value of qualitative methods for contributing to the development of meditation research. The thematic analysis of weekly participant responses to emailed reflective questions and follow-up interviews indicated that workplace meditation training can precipitate sustainable changes in attitudes and behaviour beyond the workplace. Participants reported being less reactive and better able to manage emotions, having heightened self-awareness, self-acceptance and acceptance of others and of circumstances; and, in the longer term, were better able to make healthier lifestyle choices. The analysis is contextualized by a rich description of the course and salient concerns and conditions evident in contemporary Buddhist teachings and studies of mindfulness meditation.

Introduction

The Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS) in which this study was conducted is a multi-disciplinary assessment and treatment service that takes urgent and routine referrals from primary health care services and from schools. Workers need to engage empathically with children and teenagers who have experienced varying degrees of distress, abuse and neglect. Specialist teams work with abused children within Child Protection services, and with young offenders in the local Youth Detention centre. An administration team represents the front-line of service delivery for children, adolescents and families experiencing a high level of distress. Families are often in a state of crisis and workers have to intervene in situations characterized by high levels of family conflict, where different family members may have widely differing and conflicting expectations of service delivery. This work can be enjoyable and rewarding while also demanding a high

level of self-control that according to Schmidt and Neubach (2007) accrues physical and psychological costs.

There is a rapidly growing body of literature that supports the teaching of meditation in secular settings as a strategy for reducing stress, improving emotion regulation and enhancing health and wellbeing. Typically, this literature refers to meditation as mindfulness, mindfulness training, mindfulness meditation or mindfulness practice and describes both meditation and mindfulness as forms of attentional training or focused awareness that can be cultivated with practice and which are associated with heightened psychological, psychosocial and physical wellbeing (Brown and Ryan 2003; Chambers, Gullone, and Allen 2009; Hayes and Wilson 2003; Kostanski and Hased 2008; Shapiro et al. 2005). The most commonly implemented and studied meditation course offered in healthcare settings appears to be Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Healthcare professionals attending workplace MBSR training have reported that they more often experienced feelings of confidence, competence and enjoyment at work and became more present with their patients (Cohen-Katz et al. 2004). In a randomized trial in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected to examine the effects of MBSR on job burnout and psychological distress among health professionals doing clinical work, Shapiro et al. (2005) found significant decrease in perceived stress and greater self-compassion among participants who also reported significant positive impact on their lives beyond the workplace. Baer (2011, 242) points out that interventions such as MBSR and mindfulness-based cognitive behaviour therapy (MBCT) 'produce clinically significant improvements for people suffering from many important problems, including depression, anxiety, pain and stress'. Within this emerging body of literature is a call for further research (Brown and Ryan 2003; Kostanski and Hased 2008; Langer and Moldeoveanu 2000). This paper, in small part, answers that call and addresses Bruce and Davies' concern that 'empirical investigation into mindfulness meditation is dominated almost exclusively by quantitative research designs using Western theoretical frameworks' (2005, 1332).

The small-scale qualitative study described below was initiated by David Hartman, Clinical Director of the CYMHS who had been feeling that staff, including himself, were increasingly stressed by the demands of the job. A serendipitous encounter with a colleague engaged in a project investigating the effects of teaching meditation in Catholic schools (Campion and Rocco 2009) prompted him to reflect on his experience of practising Buddhist meditation as a young doctor in the UK. He was also interested in the increasing number of research articles reporting the therapeutic effects of meditation and the congruent therapies adopting explicit mindfulness techniques. After several meetings, David invited Sharn, to teach and evaluate the calm abiding meditation course at the CYMHS. The first entry in the journal David kept from inception to completion of the course commented,

I was looking forward to the course ... I hoped it would help a couple of colleagues who were showing marked levels of stress and unhappiness....

More generally I was hoping that the course would . . . contribute to the sense of this being a good team to work in, where staff are looked after and valued, and where innovative practices are embraced.

The decision to implement training in a traditional Buddhist meditation practice was informed by three factors. First and most importantly, although Sharn had attended meditation teachings and retreats with teachers from various traditions and cultures—Thai and Sri Lankan Theravada, Vietnamese and Pacific Zen, Goenka Vipassana, Nyingma and Drukpa lineages of Tibet—her training and experience as a meditation teacher is in the technique of calm abiding meditation. She received this training within the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism where, even though it retains evidently Buddhist imagery and psychology, this particular meditation technique was described as a secular practice (Choedak 2002a, 2002b; Dalai Lama 2002). Second, Shapiro, Schwartz and Bonner (1998) reported that spirituality can enhance psychological and physical wellbeing and emotional resilience. Third, a literature search conducted by the authors revealed an absence of literature describing this particular technique in previous studies of the perceived subjective effects of meditation practice. This presented an opportunity to contribute new data to the field which to date is dominated by early studies designed to measure the effects of Transcendental Meditation (TM) and more recent studies focussed on MBSR (Kabat-Zinn 2011).

As much of the recent literature on application of meditation in work and clinical environments is related to MBSR, it is worth commenting on the relationship between mindfulness meditation and calm abiding meditation, and the relationship between mindfulness and concentration. Calm abiding meditation is *śamatha* (*shamatha*) or concentration meditation focussed on incremental development of sustained mindfulness of body, feeling and thoughts. Mindfulness is described by Thich Nhat Hahn (2008, 6) as 'our ability to be aware of what's going on both inside us and around us . . . the continuous awareness of our bodies, emotions and thoughts.' Mindfulness meditation is usually understood as separate from concentration meditation but without concentration, mindfulness is not possible. Trungpa (1995) addresses this interrelatedness of concentration and mindfulness cautioning that ' . . . *concentration* is a dangerous word to use in connection with the practice of meditation. Instead we refer to this practice as mindfulness.' (1995, 71–72). Calm abiding meditation incorporates a suite of techniques for concentrating the mind during formal sitting meditation practice that accrue benefits in the form of heightened mindfulness in meditation and in daily life. The suite of techniques incorporated in the calm abiding meditation practice, learned and taught in this instance as an intensive eight-week course, leaves little room for even the busiest mind to stray without notice. It incorporates and integrates recitation, visualization, and awareness of posture, breath and thoughts into the practice of sitting meditation. There is much for the student to attend to. Participants were encouraged to take this mindful awareness into their daily life, to notice how they use time, what distracts and distresses them, and to

contemplate how busyness can be a form of laziness—keeping us from things that would be more beneficial to ourselves and others, including meditating. After the fourth class, David reflected:

I have realised that the eight-week course is really a whole lifetime's worth of meditation technique compressed into two months. There is enough in even one lesson to build on and refine for many years to come.

The calm abiding meditation course taught at the CYMHS followed the curriculum articulated by Lama Choedak based on the teachings received by him as a student of Sakya Lineage holder, Chogye Trichen Rinpoche. It differs from the eight week MBSR curriculum in two distinct ways: recognition and inclusion of traditional Buddhist practices, and the structure, content and pedagogy of weekly classes. Although originating from, and inspired by, Buddhist meditation practices, the MBSR curriculum has avoided explicit reference to Buddhism and does not include Buddhist iconography, ritual or scripture (Kabat-Zinn 1990, 2011). On the other hand, the calm abiding meditation course, although devised by Lama Choedak as a secular meditation curriculum and practice, makes explicit reference to its Buddhist origins; in particular, the traditional ritual of setting motivation and dedicating merit, and reference to the Buddhist meditation deity, Mañjuśrī (Manjushri), and recitation of the associated mantra. Weekly MBSR classes are sequenced to introduce and progress through a range of postures and movement—lying down, walking, standing and sitting presented and integrated with a range of interactive, inquiry-based practices and discussion that include didactics as a dialectic in varied group constellations, focussed on understanding mind-body connection from intra-personal, interpersonal and neuro-physiological perspectives (Kabat-Zinn 1990, McCown, Reibel, and Micozzi 2010) but, on the other hand, participants in the calm abiding meditation classes are informed of the four classic meditation postures—standing, walking, reclining and sitting—but only sitting is practiced. Classes are presented in a routine pattern dominated by didactics and guided practice based on information imparted with some space for teacher led, whole-class discussion and questions. Despite these differences, both curricula appear to have the same learning outcomes in mind: ability to attend to present moment experience, increased intra-personal awareness and understanding of the relationship between thoughts, feelings, actions and consequences.

Participants and participation—how Calm Abiding Meditation (CAM) was taught at CYMHS

It was important that staff did not experience the opportunity to attend the course as yet another demand on their time so, with the agreement of the CYMHS management, the eight week CAM course was taught as weekly 90 min classes that began 45 min before 'knock-off' each Wednesday afternoon. This represented a joint time commitment from the organization and from the participants as individuals. An invitation went out to all staff and David noted in his journal that:

Interest in the course escalated over the week prior to it starting and some who were interested felt the time commitment made it impossible . . . the common reason being the late afternoon slot is difficult if you have small children to get from daycare.

The course began with 16 CYMHS staff attending, nine of whom contributed reflective accounts and interview responses to the study—including the co-authors David and Shaun. This group of nine contributors were six women and three men including two psychiatrists, two clinical psychologists, two administrative workers, one occupational therapist, a clinical nurse and an indigenous mental health worker. This group of nine are the ‘participants’ referred to throughout the remainder of the paper.

The first class vibrated with an air of excited anticipation. David’s journal entry describes:

Going to the room with Sharn I was pleased to see that three people had arrived early and had started rearranging the furniture. By the start time there was a steady trickle of people arriving . . . I had a moment of panic that we wouldn’t have enough room or mats . . . Interestingly everyone chose to sit on the floor rather than on the chairs provided, including some older more creaky looking colleagues . . . there seemed to be something quite good and wholesome about sitting on the floor with your colleagues and employees.

Once everyone was settled and welcomed, Sharn explained the Buddhist origins of the curriculum, how she received the teachings and that although her teachers considered it to be a secular practice, there are elements that, for non-Buddhists, would seem to be religious in nature; that she had considered leaving these out but had decided it was more respectful to her teachers and to the participants to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the curriculum in its entirety. She encouraged everyone to be open to the practice and to be open to not doing what did not feel right for them.

In the first class participants were introduced to the ‘Reflections on Calm Abiding Meditation’, a series of verses that encapsulate the sequenced teachings and instructions of the course in its entirety which are recited at the beginning of each class (see below). This was followed by an explanation of the seven points of the posture—legs, hands, back, shoulders, neck, mouth eyes, including how each point correlates with the harmonising of a particular element and the cultivation of associated positive qualities. There were two meditation practice sessions—one of 10 min and the second of 15 min during which participants were guided through paying attention to the points of the posture and their meanings. Between each of these practice sessions there was discussion and clarification of the technique. In the second practice session participants were also asked to pay attention to the sensations of the breath, to identify three phases of the breath—*inhalation, abiding and exhalation*. At the end of the class everyone was set homework and introduced to the concept and practice of dedicating merit—both of which would be a routine

conclusion to each of the classes. The homework for week one was to establish a time and place for daily practice. To dedicate merit participants were invited to bring to mind their motivation for attending the class then to imagine giving away the benefits to those that they love, to people they hardly know and to people with whom they have difficulty, wishing that they too benefit from our practice of meditation.

Each of the classes followed a similar structure within which additional elements of the technique were introduced, explained, practiced and discussed. There were two meditation sessions between which an explanation of the underlying philosophy and psychology of particular elements of the technique was presented were bookended by the recitation of verses to set motivation, and the dedication of merit and setting of homework to conclude each class. The first meditation in each class was guided practice of what has been learnt thus far. The second meditation was guided practice with the additional element of instruction.

Week by week participants were incrementally introduced to concepts and techniques for developing mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feeling and mindfulness of thought. Week two connected mindfulness of the body with mindfulness of feeling. The focus was on becoming aware of the physical aspect of feeling in its gross form—pain. Participants were asked to contemplate how pain is all pervasive and transitory and that whatever pain they may experience there are always others suffering more. They were asked to observe this during the meditation practice by seeing that any pain in their body is only a very small part of the whole body and to notice that the pain is always subtly changing. This observation and awareness is supported, or possibly challenged by the notion that suffering can be transformed and the instruction to simultaneously ‘qualify’ the three phases of the breath. Qualifying the breath is a process of visualizing the inhalation as white light filled with positive qualities, the ‘abiding’ phase as a nourishing and healing red light, and the exhalation as a dark blue or grey light that carries with it the pain and negativities the meditator wants to abandon. Week three introduced the meditation deity ‘Manjushri’ as the Lord of Speech; speech being the outward manifestation of emotion and mental feeling. Participants received a copy of the ‘Meditation on Blessing One’s Speech’ that through recitation and visualization supported the practitioner to develop speech that is ‘gentle, soft and truthful’ and ‘to remain calm, focussed and patient’ when faced with anguished others who ‘are unable to use their speech skilfully’. From week four onwards recitation of the ‘Meditation on Blessing One’s Speech’ and the associated mantra that students were encouraged to recite each day upon waking, were included in the routine beginning of each class. Each week the two meditation sessions got a little longer—ideally 30 min each but in reality the second ‘sitting practice’ is usually shorter, somewhere between 10–25 min. By week five students were receiving instructions to ‘super qualify’ the breath. This required refining attention on the sensations of the breath—while maintaining the established visualization of the breath one is able to observe that each phase of the breath has three phases. This refined attention to the breath led into counting the super qualified rounds of breath and supported mindfulness of thought. Week seven presented an explanation of the iconographic ‘Taming the Elephant Mind’

as a synthesis of the stages of meditation and the experiences of the student. Week eight was a summary and reflection on what was taught and learned. This summary is encapsulated in the 'Reflections on Calm Abiding' read at the beginning of each class.

Reflections on Calm Abiding Meditation

My mind has long been lost in search of happiness
Not knowing how transient all things are.
Seeing the unsatisfactory nature of real life experiences
I will not let my mind wander outside.

Turning back the forces of harmful habitual inclinations
And holding firmly to the peace and tranquillity within,
I rejoice in the store of joy I have discovered
In the happiness of observing the intrinsic calmness.

Let this clear and luminous nature of the mind
Not be overshadowed by my habitual tendencies;
Abiding in the natural calmness of the mind
Let me see all perceptions as nothing but mere reflections.

Neither grasping nor rejecting any sensory perceptions,
I shall see them as adventitious ripples and waves
Of the sea of my mind in deep meditation
And absorb them into the ocean of clear mind.

As I focus my mind to sit in the correct meditation posture
Let the physical self express the deep yearning
To experience the calm, still and spacious nature of the mind
And transcend the problems I have with this body.

The incoming breath brings in all the positive things outside me
And permeates the whole nervous system of my body;
Like the rays of the morning sun dispelling the darkness
It soothes the pain and temporary discomfort.

As I retain the breath, let me sustain
The vital energies of wakefulness and alertness
Enabling me to let go and forgive the past
And to enjoy the fresh manifestation of this bare moment.

My outgoing breath releases all feelings
Of tension, anger, stress, anxiety and worry;

Like the masses of dark clouds suddenly disappearing
Let the adventitious circumstances elapse to dawn a new beginning.

Breathing and observing the bare moment of awareness
Without assuming what it will become
May I live every moment with pristine awareness,
Without waiting for unforeseen future to cultivate it.

Following the wise sages by respecting their words of wisdom
May I remember skilful ways to apply them in everything
I do, say and think, so that my conduct brings no harm to others
And I do not become a victim of what I do, say and think.

While watching the constant flow of thoughts
Without discriminating between those that are good or bad
Let me neither be overjoyed with my meditation
Nor depressed by my lack of concentration.

Sinking in a withdrawal of the senses
Is relaxation of the conscious self, but not meditation.
Let me not be excited by the slight virtues of concentration
I have just begun to experience.

Holding the rope of mindfulness and the hook of alertness,
May I resolve to tame this mind which is like a wild elephant.
Steadily focussing the mind with a moderate application of antidotes,
May I discover what causes its restlessness.

When I find no sensory objects that are not my own reflection,
All visions and experiences are circumferences of myself.
Like trees, mountains, rivers and the earth
My existence is to give and share what I have with others.

How can I cling to and grasp what I have obtained from others?
As soon as I let something go, I create space and experience joy;
As soon as I give things away, I find a joy not found in keeping them.
Learning to cherish others will bring me a happiness that will last.

Participating and responding: What constituted 'the data'

The research dimension of the course was qualitative, subjective and ethnographic in approach. Interested in individuals' attitudes and perceptions of the

effects of participating in a meditation course offered in their workplace, we took a micro approach that focussed on the detail of individual cases and environments in an effort to gain some understanding of the culture—the experience and its effects, as a whole (Sacks 1992). While the validity of this approach might draw criticisms from the quantitative research fraternity for reasons including small sample size, researcher bias and a general lack of objectivity, we sought to honour the subjectivity of participants. The authors, being both participants and researchers, David and Shaun as students and Sharn as teacher, were positioned as participant observers and as such brought an ethnographic dimension to the data and analysis. The nine participants who contributed data to our research responded to reflective questions emailed weekly throughout the course, almost half participated in a semi-structured group interview at course completion and all but one engaged in individual interviews 15 months later.

The record of attendance shows that in week one there was full attendance and all participants submitted feedback. One participant attended all the classes and three others missed only one class. Over the eight week course the pattern of attendance and feedback across the cohort was irregular. All participants attended four or more of the classes and more than half missed two or less. In all but one instance, work demands were cited as the reason for missing classes. The eight participants tallied 46 attendances (attending a mean of 5.75 of the eight sessions) and submitted 30 feedback forms. Four of the eight contributed feedback for more than 75% of the classes attended, as well as participating in the group and individual interviews which had five and seven participants, respectively. The ninth participant attended every class and contributed to group and individual interviews.

Midweek between meditation classes, Sharn emailed each of the eight participants who had consented to contribute regular reflective accounts of their participation. (The ninth research participant asked to be included in the research group subsequent to completion of the course.) Each week these participants were sent a list of questions designed to guide reflecting on the focus of the previous class, the progress of their meditation and its effects on their daily life with specific regard to the 'cognitive keys' that arose in the classes. Questions were grouped to prime reflection and support learning of the cognitive keys. Each key represented a 'chunk' of information—'collections of bits of information (both cognitive and behavioral) that, when taken together, are more significant and have a greater impact than individual bits of information in isolation' (Bodie, Powers, and Fitch-Hausser 2006, 122). The eight keys were: (1) setting up daily practice: meditation is a practical skill—if we do not practice we do not learn; (2) mindful breathing; (3) mindful speech; (4) mindfulness of feeling—awareness of feelings turning into deeds and speech; (5) transforming thoughts and reactions; (6) awareness of obstacles; (7) application of the technique; and (8) appreciating benefits of maintaining practice. Weekly reflective questions included: How would you describe your current use of the elements of this key? To what extent would increasing your effective use of this key help you to achieve your short- and long-term goals? What obstacles or resistance have you encountered to effectively using

this key? What are you actually going to do to improve your effective use of this key? How has your use of this key affected other parts of your life—actions, feelings, thoughts? Participants were encouraged to report other comments/feedback/anecdotes. Review of the collated weekly responses informed the structure and focus of the follow-up interviews. With the exception of the researcher participant journal maintained by David, responses were collected and collated by question and by participant. All responses were transcribed and de-identified.

The group interview facilitated by Sharn collected responses from four of the nine consenting participants. Two consenting participants expressed their regret at being unable to attend due to illness. The interview took place in the same location and for the same duration as the meditation classes. During the interview all participants, including Sharn, took notes that were later transcribed, collated and aggregated.

Fifteen months after completion of the course and initial thematic coding of the weekly reflections and group interview responses, the consenting participants were invited to contribute to an individual, audiotaped follow-up interview. All responded enthusiastically. To avoid any inhibition or skewing of responses due to pre-existing and hierarchical relationships with the authors and to enable Shaun and David to participate, these interviews were arranged and conducted by a research assistant. Prevailing circumstances were such that seven of the now nine participants were interviewed. Interviews were 10–20 min duration and semi-structured around the questions: What do you remember about the course? How regularly did you attend? Has it had any lasting effects? Do you still practice? Why did you decide to do the meditation course? Did you complete the course? What encouraged you to keep going? What got in the way of attendance? Did it meet your expectations? Would you do it again? Would you recommend it to others? What would you say to someone who was thinking about doing the course?

This method of data collection is congruent with a researcher ethic that respects the humanity of research participants by acknowledging reflecting and communicating as valid ways of knowing. Doing research in this way offers possibilities for eroding ‘the boundaries between researcher and researched, objectivity and subjectivity, public and private’ (Rocco 1999, 61). Positioning participants to reflect on their experience would likely enhance the potential benefits of participation in the meditation course.

Analytic approach

A thematic analysis was employed to illuminate consistent and specific issues and effects that appeared within and across the differing forms, variable patterns and rich content of the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) a thematic analysis ‘is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail ... captures something important about the data’ (2006, 79–82). Our

approach was to consistently focus on semantic themes progressing nonlinearly through inductive, deductive and theoretical analysis. Our initial round of analysis identified themes embedded in the data and the second round, enriched by subsequent data collection sought to articulate a more detailed analysis of the initial themes. During the meditation course, the feedback data were collated each week by question and respondent; and points of interest were highlighted, connected or juxtaposed with points from David's journal. At completion of the course, these points of interest and reflections seemed to aggregate around concepts of time, relationships, speech/silence, the body and meta-cognition. These concepts formed the foundation for questions and discussion during the group interview. The analysis began with a close reading of the data collated from weekly feedback, group interview notes and David's journal, followed by a second reading in which recurring themes were identified. Extracts that best exemplified the themes were excerpted and analysed. Once the major themes had been identified, clarified and exemplified, the data were read again in their entirety in order to identify any counter-instances and to ensure that the analysis provided a verifiable representation of the data.

What was reportedly experienced, perceived and understood

There were early indications of perceived benefits of meditation that persisted and diversified throughout the course and some that were still evident 15 months later. In week two, a participant who attended all classes, provided feedback almost every week, contributed to the group and individual interviews and established a daily meditation routine early in the course, reported:

My blood pressure has been lower since starting meditation. I am able to stick with my exercise routine more as my routine and plans have a purpose i.e. meditation to be done each morning. I feel more in tune with myself than I ever have before. My thoughts are not so clouded any more and I think clearer. I have purpose in life. I have set goals and I am positive that I am going to achieve them this time. I am happier. I am not so scared of letting go and I am able to talk about my feelings more. Being part of this and putting myself out there is something that I would never have done before. I always kept all my feelings and problems within me to try and solve myself but now I am aware that it is not healthy to do that and you need to let go at times to get what you want out of life and those around you. I try to radiate happiness to help myself and others around me including people in the queue or serving in a shop. This certainly makes life better.

The sentiments conveyed in this feedback touch on each of the overarching themes that are woven throughout the data: (a) recognizing and managing stress responses; (b) improving outlook, lifestyle choices and wellbeing; (c) appreciating and respecting self and others as interconnected; and, (d) navigating obstacles—the value and challenge of self-discipline. Within each of the themes there are

echoes of the others. They are not mutually exclusive but interrelated as are developing mindfulness of body, of feeling and of thought. Overall, the data convey a strong sense of recognition that meditation practice is not about getting better at meditation but about becoming more aware of 'whether or not it is beneficial to maintain this or that particular state of mind', that practising meditation promotes metacognition and reflective awareness of the relationship between habits of mind and behaviour.

Recognizing and managing stress responses

Participants reported consciously invoking an aspect of the meditation technique to manage a stressful situation, recognizing in hindsight that they were less reactive than they had habitually been in a given situation or were able to recover more quickly from situations in which they experienced stress. Particular elements of the CAM technique applied to ameliorate stress reactions included mantra recitation: 'I calm myself down with the Manjushri mantra', visualization: 'I've just concentrated on the white, red and blue light, thought of options to resolve issue and skipped panic phase', posture: 'I sit with my hands in my lap, fold them with my thumbs just touching and tell myself to relax', and, most commonly and consistently, focussing on the breath for cultivating calmness and reducing reactivity: 'I have used the breathing when I felt stressed'. The stressful situations included: 'when I have to do something at work that is new to me', 'agitated clients either on the phone or face to face', 'playing squash', 'poor service in a shop', 'when someone does something stupid on the road', 'flight turbulence', 'family demands', 'being responsible for sixteen staff', 'the dentist' and 'waiting'. Fifteen months later when the participants were asked individually if they felt there were any lasting effects from the course, their responses invariably denoted improved ability to recognize and manage stress responses: 'I certainly feel less reactive', 'I get over stuff quicker', 'I'm not getting so stressed out about so much', 'I'm better at managing feelings and emotions', 'Don't swear as much or as enthusiastically', 'don't panic as much when I'm in a rush'.

Improving outlook, lifestyle choices and wellbeing

Becoming more self-aware is central to the process of mindfulness and of self-control. The CAM qualified breathing encouraged participants to identify positive qualities that they wanted to cultivate and express, to know what they are breathing in and, likewise, to identify tensions, worries, pains, or any negative habits of body, speech or mind that they wish to transform and breathe out—acknowledging stuff and letting it go. Exercizing self-control by suppressing responses such as irritability, impatience and inconsiderate verbal utterances may cause physical and mental fatigue (Muraven and Baumeister 2000; Schmidt and Neubach 2007). In contrast, the reflections of participants suggest that acknowledging 'stuff' and letting it go can lead to a more positive outlook and

better lifestyle choices: 'I am happier', 'I am more in tune with myself than ever before', 'Giving up on some unhealthy habits without really trying', 'I am not reaching for the wrong foods as much as I used to', 'I am looking for healthy food rather than biscuits and chocolate as I would normally have done before', 'Feeling great, starting to look better', 'I am making more thoughtful and purposeful decisions in my life'. Two of the participants reported improved success in establishing and maintaining an exercise routine. One of these said during the follow-up interview that although he was not formally meditating he felt that 'swimming laps, up and down, up and down, is meditative in its own right'.

The weekly feedback data reported relief from chronic ailments: 'My headaches are better . . . not absent, but more transient', 'My neck and back have been in particularly good nick too since beginning the course', 'My blood pressure has been lower since starting meditation'. At follow-up interview another participant who was no longer meditating but who had established and maintained regular practice throughout and for several months after the course, reported no longer experiencing road rage and attributed no longer requiring anti-anxiety medication to meditation helping her to think differently about situations.

Improved wellbeing was also indicated in reports of improved sleep. In week eight a participant stated, 'My quality of sleep is better'. Other participants commented: 'I seem to be more awake during the day like not needing a nanna nap in the afternoons'; 'I am happier to wake up; I used to want to go back to sleep, now I think, "Oh, I'm awake early, I can do stuff"'. At the follow-up interview another participant reported, 'I use it (meditation) to go to sleep at night. . . . I used to lay awake thinking about work. Now I know when I'm doing it and I just get myself into that frame of mind . . .'

Appreciating and respecting self and others as interconnected

Bureaucracies and the organization of work groups within them are characteristically hierarchical. During the group interview that took place two weeks after completion of the course, discussion about perceived impact on relationships at work and in general prompted David to say that 'Sitting on the floor together is a very levelling perspective.' A participant positioned at the opposite end of the staff hierarchy responded saying she, 'didn't think these people would sit on the floor and do this. Because they are all learned people.' Trungpa (1976) advises:

We must be willing to be completely ordinary people which means accepting ourselves as we are without trying to become greater, purer, more spiritual, more insightful. If we can accept our imperfections as they are, quite ordinarily, then we can use them as part of the path. But if we try to get rid of our imperfections, then they will be enemies, obstacles on the road to our 'self improvement'. (Trungpa 1976, 44)

The experience of sitting meditating together, making an effort towards self-improvement generated a sense of respect for self and for others, a sense that 'we're all human after all. It doesn't matter where we come from'; 'It shook preconceptions of people'; 'I feel more accepting of others now, less judgemental.' A senior member of staff summed it up in this way:

I find I can summon more respect for people I might dislike or be annoyed by. I think the basis for this tolerance of their failures and weaknesses, comes from tolerance of one's own failures and weaknesses. To forgive others you need to first learn to forgive yourself. This comes in part from the recognition that (for me anyway) a 'perfect' meditation session is impossible to achieve, but a 'good enough' session is, well ... good enough ...

The data are punctuated with implicit and explicit instances of recognition of interconnectedness of being aware that our actions and attitudes impact others. Almost everyone mentioned at some point that they were more mindful of their speech. One participant reported: '... if I usually have something negative to say I won't say it' and another noticed that in meetings she spent time thinking about what she wanted to say rather than listening to what was being said. Similarly, another reported being more aware of agitation in meetings and 'urges to speak and contribute when this is not strictly necessary, more able to resist these urges'. Reduced road rage appeared early in the feedback data and two participants said in the follow-up interviews that their road rage was completely gone. One of several participants who reported their heightened awareness made them feel happier, said she tries 'to radiate happiness to help myself and others around me including people in the queue or serving in a shop. This certainly makes life better.' Another in the final round of feedback said:

[I am] taking more responsibility for my own emotional reaction to situations. At the same time, being more aware of and tolerant of others' emotional reactions. For me, how I play squash is a barometer of my state of mind. I find that I still play an erratic game with unforced errors, easily get angry with myself, show too much emotion on the court (which isn't necessarily pleasant for my opponent). However last night I had a flash of insight into myself—thinking: "what's the point of getting upset when you lose points? It doesn't enhance your enjoyment of the game or the enjoyment of your opponent. What's more important to you—to win the game or to have fun with your opponent? Maybe it's good if they win points because then they've enjoyed the game and feel good about themselves. Maybe more important than winning is to play with dignity, i.e. to play mindfully even when losing.

Navigating obstacles —the value and challenge of self discipline

Like a great river runs down toward the ocean, the narrowness of discipline leads into the openness of panoramic awareness. Meditation is not purely sitting alone

in a particular posture attending to simple processes, but is also an openness to the environment in which these processes take place. (Trungpa 1976, 4)

Encountering and navigating obstacles is a salient aspect of traditional meditation teachings. On surveying the data our researcher curiosity was piqued by the apparent contradiction between expressed enthusiasm for participation, belief in and initial experiences of the benefits of meditation and what seemed at first glance to be haphazard attendance and struggles to establish and maintain a practice routine. The feedback data showed that in the first weeks physical discomfort 'mostly my knee hurting', 'my back hurts', was a common obstacle but these soon gave way to seemingly external barriers such as pressures of time and interruptions arising from family and work demands, 'finding time', 'finding the right time and place', 'change of routine', 'my family—a herd of baby elephants'. By week eight it was more common that responses to the question about obstacles to practice referred to obstacles within the meditation and recognition of personal responsibility for external conditions, for example 'Laziness—it's very easy to make excuses for e.g. a shortened sitting session'. Overall, it seemed that the concept of 'time' was perceived as both a barrier and an enabler to meditation in the sense that competing demands on available time was an obstacle to engaging in formal practice but devoting time to practice would enhance both the practice and the perceived benefits. 'Time' became a point for discussion during the group interview. Participants agreed that making time to practice was a constant challenge yet at the same time they felt that practising meditation had made them more aware of how they used their time and to manage time more effectively: 'focus on narrower slices of time seems to expand time', 'I like the discipline of it . . . the regularity of it . . . the predictability of it . . . it makes me sit still for approx 20 min each day, and that's a good thing', 'Sometimes the discipline is not to be hard on yourself'. The notion of the need for, and challenge of, self-discipline began to emerge and we decided to explore this further in the follow-up interviews.

Even though 15 months after the course was completed only two of the participants were meditating regularly, everyone, except one of the regular meditators, said that they would do the course again and would recommend it to others. They also said whenever they were absent from the course it was not because they did not want to be there but because something else got in the way. One respondent who said meditation was on his 'should do list' expressed the conundrum: 'It's a case of you're not going to see benefits until doing regularly but because not doing it regularly not enough benefit to make one sit'. One of those still meditating daily said, 'Personally I think the obstacles are yourself, how committed you are and what it's doing for you . . . to me it's beneficial'. When asked what had encouraged her to keep going she cited becoming aware that she was better able to remain calm during a crisis, to think things through on her own without advice and to quiet the busy chatter in her mind after work. She said, 'It gives a good start to the day' and 'If something goes haywire during the day you can look forward to the next time you sit'. Many of the respondents told of how interruptions to their routine would often suspend, and then finally lead to

abandonment of their practice. At the same time, within the follow-up interview data there are various indicators of external conditions conducive to developing the self-discipline needed to establish a practice routine. These included having time available during work hours, having the support of colleagues and family, living alone, finding a suitable time and place, and reciting inspirational verses.

(In)conclusion

Analysis of the data reporting what participants experienced, perceived and understood as a result of participation in the calm abiding meditation course offered at their workplace indicates that teaching calm abiding meditation in the workplace can offset the inherent institutional and emotional demands of working in a mental health service. Participation appears to have had lasting effects in terms of improving staff wellbeing in a range of domains including stress management, emotion regulation, lifestyle choices, and relationships. Few of the participants continued to meditate regularly after completion of the course but 15 months later, almost all used particular elements of the meditation technique such as the posture of the hands, the speech blessing and paying attention to the breath, to improve levels of mindfulness in daily life. Their descriptions and reflections support what Baer suggests is the reasonable assumption 'that teaching participants to practice mindfulness meditation or mindfulness skills should cultivate their ability to respond mindfully to the experience of daily life, including sensations cognitions and emotions, as well as sights, sounds, and other environmental stimuli' (Baer 2011, 243). Similarly, patients in MBSR programs reported that they became 'motivated to live a life of greater awareness that extends far beyond the eight weeks they are in the programme' (Kabat-Zinn 2011, 293).

The research method, by way of requiring participants to reflect on their experience, may have contributed to these effects. This method positioned participants to regularly reflect on the direct experience of the meditation training and observing its effects. The role of reflection in enhancing the benefits that might accrue from meditation practice is worthy of further study. As Fennel and Segal (2011, 138) point out:

... experience is of little value unless what has been experienced is clearly seen. Equally, lessons derived from specific experiences and observations are unlikely to become part of a new way of being unless reflection follows—placing new observations in context, relating them to pre-existing knowledge, creating meaning. Within mindfulness-based interventions, observation and reflection are facilitated by the inquiry process that follows meditation practices.

Collecting reflective responses throughout the course, on completion of the course and 15 months later enriched the analysis of participant experiences and indicated the ways in which benefits were sustainable and the enablers and barriers to participation and ongoing practice. The quality and detail of responses to the structured weekly feedback and the semi-structured group and individual

interviews suggests the value of these methods for augmenting the concern reported by Baer (2011, 252) that when responding to questionnaires, participants 'are unable to report accurately on their own tendency to be mindful because they are unaccustomed to noticing these aspects of their own functioning.' Collecting reflective data throughout and subsequent to the intervention is a way of giving participants practice in 'noticing' and 'reporting'.

The evidence of the relative benefits of participating in mindfulness training, in this case presented in a particular form of Buddhist meditation practice, is open to interpretation, without conclusion. The veracity attributed to each interpretation will be always and inevitably subjective. From a Buddhist perspective 'all phenomena are filtered through our subjectivity' (Norbu 1992, 35). This makes the benefits and sufferings no less real to those who experience them. In the context of the study of the mind, 'reality', truth, can only be stated subjectively. This 'truth' does not sit well with dominant discourse of scientism within which objectivity is assumed to be a condition of truth (Wallace 2000). Within Buddhist philosophy 'reality', and by extension, 'truth', is always and at once relative and ultimate. Ultimate reality is only apparent or available to the mind that is not bound by the habit of binary logic usually referred to as dualistic thinking or the dualistic mind. Dualistic thinking is competitive, hierarchical, exclusionary. It is what constitutes and characterizes samsara and relative reality. Ultimate reality is non-judgmental, egalitarian, inclusive. Mindfulness meditation research, researchers and researched will become richer when there is a loosening of the tensions and boundaries arising within the historically and discursively produced false dichotomies of subjectivity/objectivity, qualitative/quantitative and associated dualistic notions of what does or does not constitute the fabric of valid research, 'truth'. By qualitatively attending to what captured the attention of participants in an eight-week calm abiding meditation course taught in their workplace, this paper, joining the call for further research, illustrates the potential benefits and possibilities of Buddhist practices in secular settings: and, suggests the value of qualitative inquiry for investigating the effects and potential benefits of mindfulness meditation.

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