

## **Atmospherics: Reaching Another Level in Mindfulness-Based Teaching**

Overture - guide meditation -sitting - giving yourself to gravity - “you’re mostly water, after all”

Drop in - Alice Oswald’s “A Short Story of Falling”

It is the story of the falling rain  
to turn into a leaf and fall again

it is the secret of a summer shower  
to steal the light and hide it in a flower

and every flower a tiny tributary  
that from the ground flows green and momentary

is one of water’s wishes and this tale  
hangs in a seed-head smaller than my thumbnail

if only I a passerby could pass  
as clear as water through a plume of grass

to find the sunlight hidden at the tip  
turning to seed a kind of tiny rain drip

then I might know like water how to balance  
the weight of hope against the light of patience

water which is so raw so earthy-strong  
and lurks in cast-iron tanks and leaks along

drawn under gravity towards my tongue  
to cool and fill the pipe-work of this song

which is the story of the falling rain  
that rises to the light and falls again

(Alice Oswald, from *Falling Awake*)

\* \* \*

Plenty of pause.

Ask: How did that poem work on you? How was it in your body?

Wait for some answers....

Now, let me shift the question a little: What is it like in the room right now, the atmosphere? What are you aware of?

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### **Atmospherics**

So we do have a sense of atmosphere; it's something we share because it's something that we created together. It's not something I did, or you did (or you, or you), right? It's a co-creation. There is something here that we can feel into, that we can try to describe, that we can agree on—or agree to disagree on. The atmosphere of a group is ever-changing, sometimes sweet, sometimes sad, sometimes serious, even profound—and sometimes out and out funny.

Yet, we actually DON'T spend much time thinking and talking about it. Atmosphere, or the community of the group, gets left out of our usual discourse about mindfulness-based programs. And the more technical we get in our discourse, the further atmosphere drifts to the background.

I want to suggest that atmosphere is like that figure in Eliot's *Wasteland*:

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**Who is the third who walks always beside you?**

**When I count, there are only you and I together**

**But when I look ahead up the white road**

**There is always another one walking beside you**

**Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded**

**I do not know whether a man or a woman**

**—But who is that on the other side of you?**

**... T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* (lines 359-365)**

Eliot's note on these lines says they were "stimulated by the account of one of the Antarctic expeditions (I forget which, but I think one of Shackleton's): it was related that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was *one more member* than could actually be counted." It's a phenomenon that has been noted often in extremely trying situations: this "third" shows up and offers hope and support, and points out a direction, offers a way to follow.

If we attend to that sense of what is almost seen, that "third" who may be there, something that we did not know may be revealed to us. What can we learn from the atmosphere in the classroom? Is it even something we can study? Can we get it to hold still for analysis?

Let's see if we can find some answers...

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**An Agenda**

- 1) We can start with why we don't talk about it. What are the forces in our discourse that push atmosphere to the background, time and again—even for teachers...
- 2) We need, then, a different discourse, another way to talk. So we need to figure out where might we find the language—the expressive means—to explore and describe atmosphere.
- 3) Most important, for our work today, is to clarify what we—as teachers—stand to gain from an additional focus and way of talking and thinking.
- 4) And, finally, I'm really interested in how the often overlooked, somewhat mystical, somewhat mundane, atmosphere of mindfulness classes might be useful in the world beyond our classroom.

That gives us four topics, and I know it's a lot, but I'll be quick. I'd like to get these ideas out into our atmosphere, and then see if there's stuff to talk about together...

**Slide:**

**Why don't we talk about it?**

Why don't we talk about it? Well, because that's just not how we see it. Inherent in our discourse are two views that tend to overshadow atmosphere. We've all been groomed, over the almost four-decade-long project of amassing an empirical evidence base for the mindfulness-based programs, to approach mindfulness GROUPS with the individualistic and reductionistic view of science.

And yet, as Hamlet says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy." Which is to say that formalizing another way of thinking and talking in mindfulness-based work might serve us, as teachers, particularly, and might also serve the ongoing enterprise of reducing suffering in the world, which we've been doing so well for individuals, and might be expanded for our being together—that is, our communities.

Empirical research in medicine and psychology has overwhelmingly focused on individual outcomes, measuring them with quantitative methods: psychological tests, physiological measurements, even neuroscience imaging... This individualistic view locates both pathology and the possibility of relief *INSIDE* the patient's mind (or even more reductively, brain). The relational context—the atmosphere—of mindfulness classes is discounted, leaving unexplored a potentially much larger arena of pathology and relief.

In the individualistic view, we can say that a class involves *TWO* partners—the teacher and the participants. Our scientific approach sees one as affecting the other, and we look to an outcome for each individual from that process. Even when we think in terms of the

group, we are nevertheless drawn into this dance of two—we see participants relating to each other one-to-one, and the teacher relating to the group of individuals—we stay focused on individual outcomes. Even the tiny bit of research that’s been done on the “group effect” within classes disappointingly measures *individual* outcomes.

So we are heirs, if not promoters, of an individualism that effectively masks the atmosphere as a third. Ironically, this kind of individualism is aligned with our second factor of REDUCTIONISM. We substitute the typical for the actual, which actually masks the infinite particularity of each individual. We are in constant danger of trading the ambiguity of atmosphere—the thickness of embodied experience and unspoken relationships—for harder and faster concepts and principles. Even teaching can be implicated here, with temptations to recognize types and respond reductively.

I love what our empirical disciplines have done to make mindfulness more and more available in our societies. We wouldn’t be here without all of that painstaking work. I’m just suggesting that being caught in only one kind of language—one that does not give us much access to the third—keeps us from the full flowering of our work. I think atmosphere is of very real importance in refining our pedagogy, and it offers possibilities well beyond mindfulness-based programs as such.

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**How can we talk about it?**

One of the unsettling events in the smooth unfolding of our mindfulness-based discourse over the past forty years has been the very recent ETHICAL critique, coming from both outside and inside our community. I see the critique from inside as unsettling in a positive way. It begins to reveal the disappointments and discontents of those who have found the dominant views of mindfulness-based programs restricting their thought and practice.

In a way, ethics is the perfect vehicle for dissent. It’s pretty much the opposite of our current discourse. Aristotle says that as a category of philosophy ethics is—by its nature—extremely IMPRECISE, not amenable to empirical investigation. This is because ethical investigation must focus on the fullness of a situation among people gathered in community, on what is emerging within a web of relationships in the present moment. Atmosphere? The third? That’s what I’m hearing.

Further, Aristotle uses the term *poiesis* in his descriptions of the ethical situation, pointing us toward the process of ARTFUL MAKING that takes place in the moment in the group. He uses the metaphor of the products of arts and crafts—handmade and never repeatable. Maybe this begins to sound familiar to you as teachers, it’s the co-creation that results in atmosphere—the third. There’s ARTISTRY in what we do together in each moment—the situation emerges uniquely and is difficult to comprehend completely when you are inside it. It’s like the work of Mark Rothko... revisiting the same rough structure with sometimes wildly different emotional colors and relationships...

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**Rothko sequence begins**

So much can be said and done within a mindfulness-based curriculum—it's never the same: more bliss, more bluster, more light, more darkness. And think about the mindfulness-based groups co-creating their unique atmospheres under different conditions all around the world—Canada to Korea, Sweden to South Africa—how rich and diverse this work is!

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**Gratuitous Beauty and Justice**

So, we can use the language of ethics and aesthetics to talk as clearly as possible about atmosphere. We're simply adding a third partner to the dance of two that we've been watching for years. That really changes things, I think. The focus on the individual as teacher and participant (in all the one-to-one relations you can devise) expands to include the total of relationships in the moment. Group and individual come into and out of view, mysteriously, like the third in Eliot's poem. The possibilities open up the way they do in a poem, or a painting, or a song.

When we think ethically, we just end up with the aesthetic again. Aristotle would say that when people of virtuous character are gathered in the emerging moment, what they are co-creating is beautiful and just—an atmosphere that can contribute to the flourishing of the community. And what moves me aesthetically is how GRATUITOUS that beauty and justice is. It is given freely. It simply appears as we co-create mindfulness together. All contribute, yet none can locate their individual input. It's not an outcome. It's an artwork. Its ambiguities are not its weaknesses, but its strengths.

This way of talking, I trust, both complements and takes us beyond our scientific discourse. It is a vehicle for exploring what the opposites of individualism and reductionism may look like in practice. So, the other side of individualism is a healthy community that has been there all along. The other side of reductionism holds the infinite particularities of each participant and their (hidden) contributions to the moment-to-moment life of the community. That is, the third, the atmosphere, simultaneously celebrates both the profound relationality AND the infinite otherness of those gathered in community. That's unusual, perhaps unique. But as teachers, we know that, yes?

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**What does the third offer to teachers?**

Over the last ten years or so, colleagues and I have been working to develop a way of talking that belongs to mindfulness-based pedagogy—free of the restrictions of the empirical view, yet not allied against it. That mysterious third.

We've found that a **relational constructionist** discourse reflects the radical interdependence of participants and teachers that comprises atmosphere. This discourse

allows us to describe a great deal of the activity of the classroom in ways that capture the aesthetic and ethical dimensions.

The relational constructionist discourse is best exemplified in the work of Kenneth Gergen. He describes a situation—say, of a mindfulness class—as a CONFLUENCE. This is most easily defined in opposition to the individualist view, in which autonomous individuals with bounded identities make a choice to be accountable to the others in the group. In a confluence however, participants are defined by their situation. They know who they are—which means they know what they are doing—only moment by moment, as the activity of the group unfolds. So, the action of meditation practice defines meditators who sit quietly and a teacher who speaks instructions aloud. They all may change later into dyad partners who speak one-on-one to each other, and shift again to come together in group dialogue. The definition of confluence does not include either inner agency or outside control, but rather a tacit understanding within the totality of relationships of what is happening now.

Ken Gergen’s friend John Shotter noted that humans are sensitive creatures who *cannot not respond* to the activity around them. In whatever mode they choose for participation, they are connected within the confluence—the ongoing dance of spoken words, gestures, expressions, and bodily attitudes is part of them as they are part of it. In fact, for Gergen, what we call thinking is “unfinished dialogue.” In this view, even our so-called “inner self” is actually outside and part of the confluence.

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**Confluence**

It’s difficult to express this sense of co-creation, because English, like most Western languages, is dominated by the idea that we are individual agents with relatively impermeable boundaries. Gergen finds no way out of this linguistic bind, but suggests, rather, that we simply reimagine terms like teacher and participant as referring to relational beings. We might wish for descriptive resources like those in the more collective culture of South Korea. The term *ahwoolim* denotes a softness of self-boundaries that allows pleasure in unity. Another term, *shinmyong*, indicates an ecstatic state of mutual participation in the fullness of the life of the group in the moment—literally translated it’s a divine brightening. We might turn to historical Western resources such as *perichoresis*—an ancient Greek dance with at least three dancers weaving a pattern, faster and faster, until the audience sees them as melded together. This is, of course, a well-worn description of the Christian trinity. It’s ethical and aesthetic. Yeats closes his poem “Among Schoolchildren” with: O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we tell the dancer from the dance?

**Slide:**  
**Bringing the group together**

How then does a group become woven together in its dance? Gergen proposes three mechanisms—negotiation, narrative, and enchantment. In our context, these are all important, and they reveal themselves in an ethical poetic view.

**Negotiation** is the “co-creation of shared realities, and the comfort, reliability, and trust that accompany them.” As the curriculum opens for our participants, they try out how they can turn towards their experience in the present moment and find a way to be both with and in it, in a non-judgmental, or, better, a friendly way. Our pedagogy offers them freedom to choose how they will respond in each moment. We impress them with the need for confidentiality, which offers a feeling of safety in the confluence. And there’s a high likelihood that they will receive positive **physiological** reinforcement through the early practices—consider the body scan and the relaxation (or sleep!) that often arrives as a side effect of doing it. Because of the ways we teach, participants quickly find that they share this common purpose of being mindful, often feel more relaxed in class as opposed to outside it, and they know that what ever happens in the classroom will unfold sensibly. There is comfort, reliability, and trust, as Gergen says.

**Narrative**, the second mechanism of bonding, is concerned with changing a story about “me” into a story of “we.” In an ongoing relationship, the individual is invited to soften self-boundaries and instead identify with, or become, the relationship. To say, for example, “in our school we do it this way,” or “on our team we always...” involves this kind of narrative. There are, of course, stories that are told within particular confluences to illustrate its special characteristics—Gergen refers to these as “unification myths”—and such texts generate actions that bring the myths into reality. For us, this happens through another kind of text—not a story, but a lyric poem. Our participants actually step out of their stories and into the experience of the present moment. When participants share such experiences in dialogue and inquiry, their texts don’t present a storyline, but instead are collection of poems: “Songs from Our Group.”

Gergen’s third and critical mechanism is **enchantment**, through which the confluence takes on a “sense of transcendent importance.” Language, ritual, and emotion generate this sense. No doubt, our **language** is unique. And further, because we often rest in silence, non-verbal expression—posture, attitude, expression, maybe even eye contact—sends messages that enhance group cohesion, caring, and support. **Ritual** is not hard to find: formal meditation practice starts and ends, maybe with a ringing bell, and participants are called together as a “we” assembled in time, they are called together is space, too, as when the class is scattered to dyads or small groups for an activity and then comes together to talk again. The meaning arises that we can’t go on until we are gathered together.

**Emotional** expressions at transitions—from simple moments of meeting and parting, to emergent moments of welcoming the new and mourning losses—are displays of commitment to group life and, perhaps, to something beyond. You know this.

And there’s something more—something more subtle, a feeling tone, rather than an emotion, that seems generated by the facts of being together. Although Gergen eschews

physiological description, Steven Porges’s (2011) polyvagal theory nevertheless may help in understanding the subtlety here. Porges’s theory is based on the evolution of the autonomic nervous system in mammals—particularly the vagus nerves. Mammals adapt to life-threatening situations by “freezing,” to challenging situations with “fight or flight,” and (here’s the new idea) to situations of safety with what Porges calls *social engagement*. In a situation in which others are calm and regulated (as in a class after meditation) and we feel safe, the new vagus nerve slows our heart rate, inhibits fight or flight, and prepares us for optimal sharing with others. Our eyes open wider, inner ears tune to the human voice, face and neck muscles gain tone to make subtle expressions and gestures, and muscles of speech gain tone for better articulation. Perhaps a key to the feeling tone here is the associated release of oxytocin—the bonding hormone. Maybe the feeling is like coming home.

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### **Bringing the group together (2)**

We know all too well that groups that are tightly bonded are a real problem. Just a peek from between your fingers at history or this moment in the world makes that clear. Tight bonds create in-groups and out-groups. The other becomes a threat. As I’ve said though, the atmosphere of mindfulness groups seems able to balance overall unity and infinite particularity. Our bonding is strong enough to offer the sense of home, yet weak enough not to threaten those who live outside—or who dissent from inside. That’s the dance of three I think we do.

But how do we do it? Why is it unique? What’s going on? Well, let’s think ethically and aesthetically.

The key move of our pedagogy is to turn towards and be with and in the experience arising in the present moment. Every class, every confluence co-creates this with infinite particularity—it is entirely contingent on its composition and location. It’s *poiesis*—artful co-creation, not a re-creation through following principles or premises.

Aristotle says that applying principles or premises to account for actions is not really useful. At best they are “navigational instruments” to steer the ship away from the rocks, while the key is the disposition or posture of those involved—the confluence. When the group is disposed towards the good, their actions will promote the good. We are talking here about virtues. The individualist cast of mind (including Aristotle’s!) locates virtues inside individuals, but we are thinking differently. Not the teacher, not each participant, but their coordinated actions are virtuous.

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### **Diagram of the ethical space**

What then are the specific virtues of the confluence of an MBP class? I’ve been working on that for a long time, creating a model of the ethical space that is generated by the

confluence when practicing the pedagogy. Our pedagogy, which is the practice of mindfulness together, at its best, creates an ethical space of roughly a certain character.

It has three dimensions, as I draw it: important things the confluence does, important things it tries not to do, and a sort of general disposition that it attempts to maintain. Here are the virtues, then.

**Slide:**  
**Doing Dimension**

*Corporeality* foregrounds the experience of the body. Participants quickly realize that this is different from the typical modes of investigation in mental health interventions. They come into a more intimate kind of contact with the present-moment—the only time that sensation is available. As they develop this capacity, their affective and—let me flag this—**aesthetic** experiences become more available, and tolerable. They often explore these experiences in silence, while the results may be voiced and explored differently through inquiry dialogue in the class—or in the unfinished dialogue of “thinking.”

*Contingency* deconstructs experiences, particularly those that are difficult to tolerate. In the formal and informal practices in class, and in unfinished dialogues and home practice, participants track how their body sensations, emotions, and thoughts continually change and pass away. They find they can turn towards and be with/in distressing moments, observing body sensations and noticing the stream of thought—where, again, all is revealed as contingent. Things may be “worse” or “better” in the moment, but they are constantly moving.

*Cosmopolitanism* describes how the teacher and participants hold the meanings that arise in the moment—in inquiry, dialogue, and in the many simultaneous “unfinished dialogues” of the class. We don’t abstract these meanings, or reduce them, or fit them into some set of values, rather we see meaning as contingent. Cosmopolitanism is particularly important because mindfulness practice often opens participants to the aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of their lives—that realm of infinite particularity. We simply hold the meaning that is created moment to moment, without commentary, correction, or critique.

**Slide:**  
**Non-doing Dimension**

There are three things we do, and three we don’t. I want to say that **absence** has the greatest direct effect on atmosphere.

It intrigues me that what might be called virtues in Buddhist thought are negatively constructed; that is, they are dispositions *away from* rather than towards particular forms of action. According to Richard Gombrich, the Buddha’s ethical process was pragmatic—simply to fix what was broken. Because the “three poisons” of greed, hatred, and ignorance drive unethical behavior, the three “cardinal virtues” then, of course, are

non-greed, non-hatred, and non-ignorance. If we're pragmatic like this, then, we look at the drawbacks of the medical and mental health care system (remember, I'm from the US!) with its impersonal labeling of pathologies, its hierarchical power structure, and its instrumental interventions that ignore the whole person, suggests that the virtues of mindfulness-based programs, which have huge potential to change the system, are to be non-pathologizing, non-hierarchical, and non-instrumental in what we do. In typical thinking, we would locate such virtues in the teacher, but now, we can see they belong in the confluence.

*Non-Pathologizing* is constantly in tension within the MBPs, because many of them have target populations defined by medical diagnoses or demographic characteristics; yet the teacher must see the whole person. It is certainly easiest to maintain a non-pathologizing disposition within a program open to a heterogeneous population, in which participants from all walks of life, with almost any medical and/or psychological diagnosis, or none at all, may come together as a confluence. Jon Kabat-Zinn describes how in MBSR

“Although our patients all come with various problems, diagnoses, and ailments, we make every effort to apprehend their intrinsic wholeness. We often say that from our perspective, as long as you are breathing, there is more ‘right’ with you than ‘wrong’ with you, no matter what is wrong... we make every effort to treat each participant as a whole human being rather than as a patient, or a diagnosis, or someone having a problem that needs fixing.”

Non-pathologizing re-creates participants, replacing their limited diagnostic identities with unlimited possibilities. They're not in our class to remove something unwanted from their experiences, but instead to learn to live their lives, as they are, to the fullest.

*Non-Hierarchical*, too, can be seen as contested. Participants come from our cultures of expertise, and so assume that the teacher is the expert, and that they are lacking. We have a lot of work to do in the pedagogy to shift this view. Simply seating the group in a circle sends a non-hierarchical signal—no one is at the head. And asking—from class one—for participants to speak to the whole group—sends the message, don't tell me; tell **us**. Dyads and small groups break down hierarchy too; all that gets expressed belongs to participants, not the teacher. This not only helps dissolve teacher-participant hierarchy, it also makes the more and less extroverted participants more equal.

The key move of the pedagogy is the greatest leveler: the group practices mindfulness by turning towards the experience of the moment to be with and in it—and no one knows how it will be, for anyone. Our stance of **not knowing** is fundamental to the non-hierarchical disposition. There are not “right” answers, there are only meanings negotiated by each participant—perhaps in dialogue out loud, or maybe in the “unfinished dialogue” of thinking. And remember, it is all shaped within the confluence.

*Non-Instrumental* points to the truly radical nature of our work. Our basic orientation towards participants is not to fix something that is broken inside them, but to create a space in which they can turn towards and be with/in the life they have in this moment. It's not about pushing for a particular experience, but about being friendly with the one you're having. Kabat-Zinn describes it as

“This challenge we pose to our patients in the Stress Reduction Clinic at the very beginning, and with the introduction to the body scan meditation, or even the process of eating one raisin mindfully: namely, to let go of their expectations, goals, and aspirations for coming, even though they are real and valid, to let go—momentarily, at least—even of their goal to feel better or to be relaxed in the body scan, or of their ideas about what raisins taste like, and to simply “drop in” on the actuality of their lived experience and then to sustain it as best they can moment by moment with intentional openhearted presence and suspension of judgment and distraction, to whatever degree possible.”

In the pedagogy, we offer practice in the spirit of “Let’s try this together and see what happens.” This disposition shapes the language of the classroom, helping participants to explore their experience as it unfolds in the moment—however it might be. Guidance, as I like to say, is all diplomacy—not *do this*, but *I wonder...?* Inquiry works this way, too, taking a fluid path to stay with what is arising, rather than chasing after some preferred outcome. You know, “There’s nowhere to be but here, and nothing to do but this.” As such language saturates the confluence, participants may begin to take the same tone in their own practice—attending differently within their dialogues in dyads and small groups, and in their “unfinished” dialogues, as well—attending even to their thinking in a different way.

Of course, implicit within this choice to be with and in experience is its reverse—the choice to change what can be changed. This also reflects the non-instrumental disposition. That is, the teacher makes the concept of choice available, but leaves alone what the participant changes or how. On both sides of the coin, curiosity and courage are essential.

*The virtues are interdependent.* If any one is compromised, all are compromised. When we label a participant with pathology, we assume a superior place, and imply an instrumental intention behind the curriculum. It’s extremely important, then, to understand the costs of compromise. Balancing the three virtues is precarious and requires significant care, in both curriculum design and teaching. This is another way of considering the poetics of mindfulness-based programs.

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### **Defining home**

With artful creation, a mindfulness class confluence would bring forth a virtuous community. The bonds among participants would be strong enough that they all feel safe and cared for, yet weak enough that any in dissent from the others (even if only in the unfinished dialogue of thought) may also feel safety and caring extended to them. That is, they can be at home—which Robert Frost defines as “...the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in” and, in the same poem, “I should have called it / Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

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### **Friendship**

And so we reach the third dimension, *Friendship*. This dimension of the ethical space is an atmosphere that is alive for those within it. It pervades the entire space... Ralph Waldo Emerson characterizes it beautifully in the opening paragraph of his essay “Friendship”:

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken. Maugre all the selfishness that chills like east winds the world, the whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether. How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to, whom yet we honor, and who honor us! How many we see on the street, or sit with in church, whom, though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with! Read the language of these wandering eyebeams. The heart knoweth.

While co-creating mindfulness through the pedagogy, the group (and its participants) possess a particular know-how—how to be in the moment together, whatever the quality of that moment. And they feel that as friendship...

We could easily reduce it to the physiological feelings of Porges’s social engagement response—a little touch of oxytocin in the night. Yet it is far more complex and layered. A group involves at least two and often thirty or more participants, in various situations of suffering and exploration. The pedagogical actions of the class have a powerful impact on the entire group. Imagine an inquiry in which physical pain and its effects on the emotions are explored. The dialogue is oriented around body sensations. The entire group is paying attention, tracking what is happening with the participant who is speaking, or engaging in their own explorations as unfinished dialogue. The co-created atmosphere is supporting them all. And the situation is recursive. As the spoken dialogue touches experience, the language becomes thick and expressive, and draws vivid responses from the participants. All of this deepens the quiet, the emotion, and the friendliness in the space.

Participants feel in and from the group the support that allows them to turn towards and be with and in their experience of the moment. This is not simply theoretical, nor is it merely physical. Rather, it is a relational accomplishment. Consider—as teachers, we don’t “hold” the group; we are being held along inside it. There might be less effort, less potential for “burnout” if we attend to that fact.

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**OK, but what is it good for?**

As the class again and again co-creates the ethical space, they are steeping in an atmosphere with particular possibilities. How can we think about how this changes them? Can we even talk about “outcomes” in a relational discourse?

Gergen has a concept that clarifies. He notes that we steep in many different confluences in our lives. So, we are imbued with a repertoire of ways of being—**potentials** Gergen calls them—and he would call us **multi-beings**. As we continue to move from situation to situation, to enter new and different relationships, the potentials of our multi-being are available as needed and appropriate. “In sum,” he says, “all meaning/full relationships

leave us with another's way of being, a self that we become through the relationship, and a choreography of co-action. From these three sources, we emerge with enormous possibilities for being."

Consider the atmosphere that develops through an inquiry between teacher and participant following the body scan practice. Louise responds to the teacher's question, "Is there anything left to say about this experience?"

Timidly, she ventures, "I had trouble with this," and sits quietly.

The teacher prompts, "Can you say more?"

"I was in a lot of pain—a lot—the whole time."

"So, what did you do? Did you find any ways to help yourself?"

Louise pauses, thinking, and says, "I tried moving, but I couldn't get any relief. I ended up just listening to you and trying to follow the scan. I kept being pulled away by the pain in my back."

The teacher asks, "And what happened?"

"Nothing really. Nothing changed for me, but I got through it. Trying to stay with what you were saying kind of distracted me, so I guess that was a help."

"I'm curious about how it is for you right now, Louise," says the teacher. "What do you notice when you check in?"

"It's the same. Still hurting. It's so frustrating...and sad."

"Would you be willing to, maybe, take another look? Just bring your attention to how it is moment to moment, and see what happens?"

"Well, I guess I could try."

"We can all do this too," says the teacher, looking around the circle and taking in the other participants, who are quiet and still, watching or looking down or away. Then saying, generally, "Maybe closing your eyes, if that suits you, and bringing your attention into your body in this moment." Fifteen seconds go by, a long time. "Louise, what are you finding?"

"Well, it hurts, the same as before."

"OK, let's try something. Can you bring your attention to one place that is hurting? It doesn't need to be the most painful place." A little pause. "And can you find a friendly way to stay with that? ... Maybe you could notice your breathing, and see if that helps you to hold the sensations a little more softly. So, you're just softening around the place you've chosen to be with."

Thirty seconds go by, a very long time. The teacher asks, "Louise, what are you noticing now?"

"It still hurts," she says, "but it's different...not so sharp as before."

"Can you stay with it? Keep breathing and softening?"

Another long time. A silent room. "Let's just check in again. What do you notice now?"

"It was duller for a while, but now that you've asked, it's back to the sharpness again. But there were better moments, I guess."

The teacher pauses. "So there was the same old, same old, and for moments there was something better, or at least different. That's worth knowing, maybe?"

"I think so, yeah."

The teacher looks around the circle, sitting together in the quiet. Not quite ready

to move on.

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**Could we measure it?**

The group is steeping in a very particular atmosphere. Many have been moved in their own way by the dialogue, or by their own possibly parallel unfinished dialogues. They are steeping, and being imbued with the potential to create such a space, such a community with others, elsewhere.

Sometimes the atmosphere is really powerful. Aesthetic thinking lets us talk about that, too. One way is with categories of the sublime and the beautiful, from eighteenth century aesthetic theory. Burke was the first to make the distinction, associating the sublime with confronting moments of “terror,” such as storms at sea or ascents of mountains—from a safe distance. Such confrontations take spectators beyond the rational, beyond the limited ego, and into a space where it is possible to connect with others.

In mindfulness confluences, the sublime identifies strong moments of turning towards and being with and in challenging experiences—with the dread of death or madness looming in the background. The inquiry with Louise is charged a bit with this existential anxiety, and the atmosphere created might be related to the sublime. The beautiful, Burke says, appeals mainly to the domestic affections, to love, tenderness, and pity. He says, “with the sublime ‘we submit to what we admire’, whereas with the beautiful ‘we love what submits to us.’”

The sublime connects us as we face a fearful prospect together. On the other hand, beauty brings us closer as we agree on the pleasure of an experience. When a class steeps solely in the beautiful, never encountering the sublime, the real power of mindfulness—of turning towards and being with—is not revealed. Participants can’t steep in that kind of atmosphere, so they are imbued with different potentials. You know what the beautiful is—you go there sometimes, just as I do—saying the right thing, tying a ribbon on it, dropping in a random poem or a platitude. What—and how much—do we lose?

**slide:**

**Could we measure it?**

Here’s another take—more from the ethical side, perhaps. Consider the encounter with tragic events within a structured ritual frame, as in tragic drama—particularly, the classical liturgy of the *Dionysia* of Athens. In it, the citizens of the community are gathered to reaffirm the solidarity of the city—the capacity to be together for the good of all. The key move in our teaching—to sit still with what is arising in the moment—is also the transformative ritual of viewing tragic drama. Contemplative immobilization in assigned seats, as Stanley Cavell puts it, keeps audience members from calling or acting out during the drama, so each must recognize their own separateness and see the otherness of the one undergoing the tragedy—they are confronted with a clear view of the other’s full humanity, and their own. This recognition of mutual separateness,

paradoxically, creates solidarity—and a space in which ethical community may arise and participants may steep.

Drama enacts a composed text. In mindfulness classes, as participants struggle aloud in inquiry with the suffering that comes to them in the moment and maybe is relieved by bringing awareness to it, that experience becomes a unique text for the group. Such texts continue to influence the atmosphere of the classroom as they are alluded to aloud or recalled in unfinished dialogue. They add intensity to the process of steeping.

The intensity of the atmosphere is useful for the teacher in the MBIs, because when the tragic (the sublime, you choose) has been confronted in the classroom, the ethical space is strong and participants are being imbued with potentials for being together in an ethical community. Conversely, when the tragic is avoided, or rarely invoked, the ethical space may be weaker, and potentials less well developed.

Intensity also answers some of the current questions being asked under the guise of ethics about effective applications of mindfulness in non-clinical settings. When the default is to move towards pleasurable experiences, such as the reduced stress and increased happiness promised by so many not-so-mindfulness-based programs out there—opportunities to touch the tragic dimension are restricted, which keeps intensity low, and thereby undermines the benefits of the ethical space. With well-educated and highly practiced teachers, however, the clinical applications of mindfulness continually invite the confrontation with tragedy, ensure the fullness of the community of the ethical space, and reinforce the potentials developed by steeping within it.

Teachers cannot bring an atmosphere into being or maintain it through acts of will or by applying techniques. It's the third. It's GRATUITOUS beauty and justice. It is, simply, the successful co-creation of mindfulness—the result of **actions in relationship**. The model I proposed is one way of describing what an MBI group does—I'm not proposing ethical principles that can be “applied” in other situations. This is something alive! Nevertheless, I hope that what I've been talking about is useful for refining our thinking about curricula, pedagogy, and teacher training.

**slide:**

**Is any of this useful in the “real” world?**

I said I was going to talk about four things, and I've only covered three. How any of this might be useful in the world beyond mindfulness-based programs is worth thinking through. I'm hoping we might get a chance to do some of that in tonight's panel... For right now, though, what are you thinking, as teachers?

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