

Teacher-student relationship in mindfulness training

Some thoughts

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In a first draft of an article about the Buddhist roots of mindfulness training I wrote concerning the student-teacher relationship: 'In MBSR/CT this relationship is modelled after the client-therapist relationship ...'.

Jon Kabat-Zinn immediately replied:

MBSR was certainly never modeled on the client-therapist relationship, and I wouldn't want a statement asserting that as true here, or anywhere else. Being a therapist is often an impediment to teaching mindfulness, and especially to the element of inquiry and dialogue, as opposed to the instinct to give advice or be warm and friendly and supportive sometimes in ways that disempower the person and their own responsibility for their thoughts and feelings, and for their practice.

Of course Jon was right. The relationship between a mindfulness teacher and the participant is very different from the client-therapist relationship. Mindfulness teachers, especially when they have limited personal meditation experience, easily fall into this trap.

What I meant to say however was that the relationship also clearly differs from the classical student-teacher relationship in Buddhism. Mindfulness trainers e.g. do not expect their students to make three prostrations in front of them. Mindfulness training is not like guru yoga in Tibetan Buddhism. It does not insist, as Genpo Roshi used to do, on total submission to the teacher. Being a Buddhist teacher or student can also become an impediment to teaching mindfulness.

Adopting the Asian model of student-teacher relationship in Western Buddhism has not been without serious problems. Just the many sexual scandals already testify to that. What may have worked in one culture may not always work in another culture. Buddhism has always been well aware of that.

So what defines the teacher-student relationship in mindfulness training? And even more: has this model something to offer to the student-teacher relationship in Western Buddhism?

Faith

Buddhism is not a belief system, it is an education system. But faith has a crucial role in teaching. You cannot learn to play the piano if there is not at least some degree of faith in your own capability to do so. As for the teacher: teaching is based on faith in the capability of the student. Faith is the starting point of teaching. Without this basic faith no teaching is possible. By the time the pianist strikes the first note of a Beethoven sonata in front of a full concert hall his faith will have transformed considerably.

In early Buddhism faith (saddha) is a central term. In Mahayana faith finds its expression in the notion of Buddha nature. Every sentient being is endowed with Buddha nature. I am always very moved by the Lotus Sutra when it says: 'The Buddha teaches only bodhisattva's', implying that each of us is a Buddha to be.

This is not about the philosophical question whether man is naturally good or bad. It is much more pragmatic. Faith is about how we relate to the other person, in this case how the teacher relates to the student.

Starting a new MBSR or MBCT group is not starting with a group of people with more or less severe problems. Rather it is starting with a group of potential Buddha's. Mindfulness

training in a clinical context is a very empowering way of working with people. The focus is not on what is wrong but on what is possible.

Faith, as opposed to belief, cannot be claimed or forced. Be aware when someone demands faith. Faith can only grow from experience. The faith of the teacher grows from his own meditation practice.

Resonance

If as a mindfulness teacher you have yourself had the experience of falling apart on your cushion and nevertheless surviving, even growing from that experience, you can have faith in the student's capacity to do so, and genuinely communicate that faith, openly without demand.

You can show your own capacity to stay with the student in that experience without trying to fix and consequently disempower the student. It is this faith, matured through practice, that can resonate with the experience of the student. The faith of the teacher is an open invitation.

There is no such thing as instructive interaction. You cannot change the mind of the student. You cannot implant mindfulness, faith, liberation ... into someone's brain. But our brains do resonate, like similarly tuned strings. To return to the metaphors of the Lotus Sutra: the Buddha in the student will resonate with the Buddha in the teacher, heart to heart.

Respect

The basic symmetry of that relationship allows for an asymmetry of experience and faith. But it empowers the student and his own responsibility for his practice. Once the student has realised from his own experience (has seen for himself) this faith in the possibility of life and release there is no more need for asymmetry.

If the teacher has faith in the practice and in the student's capacity to awaken, that faith will resonate. If the teacher is coercive or manipulating, even with the best intentions, what will resonate will be manipulation and gullibility, not faith and liberation.

This attitude of faith generates tremendous respect. You do not sexually abuse a Buddha. Even in front of this overwhelmingly attractive person (and consenting adult) you know that something immensely more beautiful is at stake. It is not even about rules of conduct or restraint but about what is of real value to you.

We are usually very sensitive about sexual problems and often much less about all those much more subtle forms of abuse and disempowering based on an attitude of 'I know what is good for you'. Approaching the other a Buddha to a Buddha re-empowers, respects and protects both teacher and student.

Faith, resonance and respect are not three different things, they are three aspects of the same thing viewed from a slightly different angle. So I want to argue for a relationship, as well in mindfulness training as in Western Buddhism, based on faith. In the language of the Lotus Sutra, a relationship from Buddha to Buddha, a relationship that is only possible between Buddhas.