The Impact of a Mind/Body Medicine Class on Counselor Training: A Personal Journey

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The Impact of a Mind/Body Medicine Class on Counselor Training

A Personal Journey

Judy A. Maris

This first-person narrative explores the impact of mindfulness training in the form of qigong, yoga, and meditation on the developing clinical skills of a student in the master’s-level counseling program at Montana State University. It explores the ways in which mindfulness helped the author to be more fully present in session and to tolerate both her own internal distress and the distress of her clients.

**Keywords:** mindfulness; qigong; counselor education; meditation; mindfulness-based stress reduction; personal growth; mind/body

When I stepped into Dr. John Christopher’s class, Mind/Body Medicine and the Art of Self Care, in January of 2004, I little suspected that I was embarking on an inward journey that would profoundly change both my relationship with myself and my developing counseling practice. As master’s level students at Montana State University, we were invited to experience both ourselves and the phenomenological world in ways that involved emptying more than filling up, letting go rather than accumulating, being rather than doing. The concepts, practices, and techniques to which I was introduced helped me rediscover the exquisite reality of the present moment, which is, of course, the only thing one has.

Despite many efforts over the years to resolve dysfunctional core beliefs, on that winter morning in 2004, my way of being in the world still seemed characterized by reactivity as a way of life. The Mind/Body class offered an inward journey as a way out of the reaction reflex. In addition, the course practices provided a means for reconnecting with my own long-ignored physical self. Reconnecting with my body enabled the mind/body split that so characterizes Western culture to quietly and gently begin healing in me, leading to a greater felt sense of integration, grounding, and wholeness.

At the time I began the class, I was halfway through my internship at the campus counseling center. My earlier enthusiasm and confidence had
disappeared. My hope of becoming an effective counselor was dimming. Sessions with clients had become strained, anxious work. If one session seemed to go well, the next three seemed more like the blind misleading the blind. Supervisors found numerous issues to address concerning my work. In an effort to counteract my many missteps, I began approaching clients with a long mental list of admonitions to myself. But a minute or two into a session, I would get caught up in the content of my clients’ narratives. What I wanted most of all was to solve their problems for them so they would go away happy.

Supervision became a time of heightened anxiety and dread. Listening to audiotapes of sessions with my supervisor was wrenching. I had lost my abilities both to conceptualize and to track client affect. I would leave supervision with renewed determination to “focus on the feelings,” as if that were the only issue. Yet I seemed unable to do even that seemingly simple thing. Halfway through my internship, I seriously wondered if graduate school had been a sad, expensive mistake on my part. Feeling lost and ashamed, I began the new semester in January with trepidation, demoralized and fearful that I just did not have what it took to be a counselor.

I registered for the Mind/Body Medicine course thinking it would be easy. I never anticipated that it would teach me how to be a counselor. The course requirements included a commitment to practice some form of contemplative movement such as yoga, tai chi, or qigong in addition to meditation 4 days a week on our own plus twice a week in class for the 15-week duration. Our classes began with qigong and yoga and often included periods of sitting meditation as well as lecture (minimal), discussion, and journaling. The class requirements seemed simple enough and offered a welcome break from the real academic work of my internship and other theory-based or skills-based courses.

On the first day of the Mind/Body Medicine class, John Christopher introduced us to the concept of mindfulness, using a raisin, as Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) often does in his Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic. John invited us to look upon the small raisin resting in our palms as something from another planet that was highly valued by its inhabitants but as something we had never before actually experienced for ourselves. Although I had consumed my fair share of raisins in my life, I had never experienced one in this way, in its own fullness and in my own fullness, in our joint presentness. John led us through our raisin encounter, using all our senses. We looked at, smelled, felt, tasted, and joined with it. Setting aside my ideas about raisins was challenging, but the more I allowed myself to relax into the present experience, the more authentic the experience felt. Although
raisins had never been among my favorite foods, focusing my attention on
this particular raisin allowed for an altogether different experience. I
recorded in my journal the experience of chewing that single raisin: “Biting
into it, I felt its resistance in the rough, protective skin which gave way to
a flood of raisin-ness. The fluid raisin and the fluid me became one in an
unfolding kind of way, not all-at-once. The soft, intense, inner essence
became, for a brief instant, all there is. When I swallowed this one raisin, I
felt the warmth of the sun flow through me.” At the conclusion of the exer-
cise, I felt integrated, grounded, peaceful and whole—at least for a few
minutes. Then I headed over to the counseling center where my real work
awaited me: my ongoing struggle to connect with my clients.

Contrary to my preconceptions, the first few weeks of the Mind/Body
Medicine class were very challenging. It was unnerving to be publicly engaged
in the odd postures of qigong and yoga. I often felt breathless and light-headed,
even nauseated. I doubted I could keep up with the other class members, most
of whom were decades younger. One early journal entry described my experi-
ence this way: “Fear and resistance. Fear and resistance.”

My fearfulness intensified during the first few classes until I considered
dropping the class. It seemed the more I shrank from the distressing sensa-
tions, the more they intensified. This class was mirroring my experience
with my internship in too many unpleasant ways. The last thing I needed
was more failure. Yet I was also intrigued. I was experiencing something
quite new and not yet nameable in little moments, in sideways glances.

Gradually I began to take what I was learning in class home with me,
beginning each day with a combination of movement and meditation. I
especially enjoyed the 8 Brocades of Qigong with its evocative names and
the grace of the movements. The mindful state created by qigong usually
stayed with me as I segued into my awkward yoga practice. I was becoming
conscious of my body, its sensations, and its resistances in ways that I had
never been before.

Meditation, on the other hand, was more challenging. I often felt physi-
cally uncomfortable, restless, and irritated that I was not able to settle down
and do it “right.” I judged my meditation performance even more critically
than I had initially judged my physical performance. Instead of feeling
calm and peaceful, I felt agitated and anxious, able to let go of my straining
for correctness only fleetingly. As I recorded in my journal, whenever I
tried to attain a more peaceful state and focus on my breath, “my magpie
mind quickly swooped in, fluttering and squawking in front of my face,
blocking my vision. After the briefest moment of resting, my center tilted
and I spilled out of myself, scattered on the floor.” I struggled to understand
how to do this meditative state thing. It did not seem like it should be so hard to just sit quietly for a brief period of time, to keep my mind focused for just a few breaths. But it was incredibly difficult and elusive. Meditation was supposed to be relaxing, wasn’t it? Why was I so agitated?

Course readings and class discussions gradually changed my understanding of meditation. The purpose of meditation was not to enable me to experience good sensations but to enable me to experience actual sensations. It became clear to me that, while quieting my magpie mind might result in a restful, dreamy state, the primary purpose of this style of meditation (Vipassana) was to increase my capacity for attending to what was actually occurring. Noticing that my mind had drifted. And then returning to my breath. Noticing the craziness. And then returning to my breath. Noticing the magpie squawking without judging it. And then returning to my breath. Again and again. Feeling the numbness in my legs without shrinking from the sensation. And then returning to my breath. Tolerating my anxiety without bolting. And then returning to my breath.

The irony was that every time I noticed that my discursive mind was off and running through the smoke and mirror worlds of past and future, I was instantly back in the present moment. Noticing can only occur in the present moment. The fact that the mind chatter went on (almost) all the time did not make it significant. I was beginning to notice my thoughts without either acting on them or reacting against them. Gradually, my reactive mind began to lose some of its automaticity. Numbness, anxiety, past- or future-focused chatter ceased ruling my life on a moment-by-moment basis.

Gradually, I was able to be in present awareness for moments at a time without taking mental flight. When my mind did wander, as it continued to do, I would eventually notice and gently bring it back. That is all I had to do. I did not have to “control” my mind at all. And if it did not need to be controlled, it also did not need to be feared. On any given morning I might feel restless or uncomfortable or irritated, but my mindful responsibility was just to notice those feelings—not to attempt to control or banish them. In allowing them to just be, I was learning, in quite a visceral way, how very temporary, even fleeting they are. All I really needed to do was to notice them and their phantom power over me would wane. I realized that what I had really been battling in my first weeks of mindfulness training were my own unnamed fears: failure, loss of control, humiliation, even loneliness. Non-doing did not mean non-being. In fact, it supported being at the deepest levels. It became clear that the source of my struggles was not my feelings themselves but my reactions to my feelings.
So engrossed was I with my new daily practices that I did not notice at first the effect they were having on my counseling work. I was surprised that my supervisors were evaluating my work more positively, using words like “calm,” “connected,” “safe” to describe my presence with my clients; words like “new alive quality” and “willingness to take risks.” What had changed? Clearly, the first thing that had changed was my relationship with myself. Mindfulness practice enabled me to experience the present reality, both internal and external, from a kind of participant/observer stance. I noticed I was having thoughts and feelings. My thoughts and feelings were no longer just having me. A space was created in which it was possible to respond rather than to react.

In the participant/observer space created through regular mindfulness practice, there is room for curiosity. I can sense my anxiety, for example, and wonder about its meaning. Is it a response pattern from my past experiences? Am I feeling hypersensitive because of that argument with my son? Am I sensing the anxiety the client feels as she risks expressing anger toward a parent? Had I skipped breakfast? The newfound ability to choose curiosity over reactivity opened up the consultation room instead of shrinking it down. This moment-by-moment multidimensionality of interaction with my client allowed for a vitality that was so sadly missing in my previous work. I had less need to avoid, control, or suppress my own feelings and certainly less need to impose similar constraints on my clients. Paradoxically, the sessions no longer felt like they were careening out of control.

During session, my own emotional reactivity sometimes has the effect of taking me out of my body and out of the room in significant ways. Shallow breathing, externally focused vigilance, and the urge to escape, for example, may accompany feelings of fear. I counterbalance these anxiety reactions by consciously dropping back into my body, taking a slow, deep breath, feeling the solidity of the chair beneath me, and opening myself to the present moment without judgment of either myself or my client. After a session has ended, I take a few moments to check in with myself. More often these days, I find myself intact and ready to address the next thing in my day. Sometimes I need to engage in some restorative activity. Sometimes, in those few moments of after-glow (or after-burn), I pick up something about the client or our interaction that I missed during the actual session.

Mindfulness practice also helped me to increase my self-care before, during, and after sessions. I now begin a session five minutes before the client arrives. That time is not devoted to returning phone calls, or writing out my grocery list or even reviewing my notes from the previous sessions. That time is for settling into my body in the here and now. That time is for reconnecting...
with myself in the present moment. Now when I greet a client, I notice her and I notice myself. We are already working before she sits down.

I have noticed an increased tolerance for difficult moments as well. For example, a couple I was seeing was trapped in an endless loop of resentment and recrimination. They had just engaged in a dazzling display of this destructive pattern in my office, leaving me unsure of the ground beneath us. The wife turned demandingly to me and said, “Can you help us out here!?” My initial reaction was defensive and panicked. I had to solve this problem for them and do it right now or everyone would know what a fraud I was! But that observer self came to my aid, creating enough space for me to respond rather than react. I said softly, “I’m feeling pretty lost and hopeless right now, too.” They both seemed so surprised by my response that the anger drained right out of the room, replaced by the sorrow, loneliness and despair beneath it. Then we were all ready to work.

My reactive sense of responsibility for and fear of my clients has not disappeared, but I am more likely to notice my impulse to control them or the session. Then I can take a metaphorical step back, while moving in more closely with my full attention on what is actually happening in this moment. I am less fearful of admitting that I have no pat answers for them. I am better able to work in collaborative, dialogical relationships, to engage in an I/Thou connection about which Buber (1958) wrote so eloquently. Being fully present with another human being is a profoundly intimate experience. For some clients, the combined intimacy and spaciousness in and of themselves seem to function as change agents. Perhaps not surprisingly, my humility and my confidence seem to increase in proportion to each other.

By the time I entered mindfulness training with John Christopher, I was approaching each counseling session braced for failure. I was afraid of the client, afraid of not knowing what to do, afraid of my incompetence and inadequacy, and afraid of feeling those feelings. Most of all, I was afraid of the emptiness my efforts to be a counselor engendered in me. Once I became more accepting of my own feelings, I was able to tolerate my fears and allow them to sit quietly in the background, ready to provide me with important information if the need arose. As I was able to focus more of my energy and attention on my client, I became much better able to tolerate my client’s fear or anger or sadness or shame without feeling pressured to relieve him of those feelings. Best of all, mindfulness practice helped me shift from dwelling in the awful emptiness of the bottomless void to the emptiness of an awaiting bowl, ready to receive, to be filled and to give back.
References


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