

Mindfulness: Being Present

Module Four:

The Undercurrent and Observer

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THE SANCTUARY

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1. UNDERCURRENT AND OBSERVER

UNCONDITIONAL

Willing to experience aloneness,
I discover connection everywhere;
Turning to face my fear,
I meet the warrior who lives within;
Opening to my loss,
I gain the embrace of the universe;
Surrendering into emptiness,
I find fullness without end.
Each condition I flee from pursues me,
Each condition I welcome transforms me
And becomes itself transformed
Into its radiant jewel-like essence.
I bow to the one who has made it so,
Who has crafted this Master Game;
To play it is purest delight -
To honor its form, true devotion.

Jennifer Paine Welwood

1.1 A Model for Understanding Our Inner Environment

When we learned to settle the mind it became clear that the mind has a strong tendency to “do its own thing” – jump around after thoughts. We then looked into where the thoughts go when we get distracted. Now we take our learning a step further and investigate – where do the thoughts come from? We discover that there is a constant stream of chatter running in the back of the mind. It consists of thoughts, feelings, ideas, images, sometimes a song or a tune, emotions, memories and so on - an endless jumble. It’s always there and we are always interacting with it. It probably comprises the main feature of our inner environment. We will call it the undercurrent because it flows just below the level of normal mind focus, namely what we are specifically thinking about or directing our attention to at any given moment.

When we understand this, we realise that there are two things happening simultaneously – the undercurrent and “normal mind focus”. When we look closely at the latter, we discover that its main characteristic is that it observes. It is the aspect of our consciousness that enables us to know what is going on. It observes the undercurrent with its constant flow of activity, and at the same time it knows it is observing. When we are distracted, that knowing quality is lost. We will call it the observer.

Our consciousness is multidimensional – there is the undercurrent on the one hand and the observer on the other. This is what makes it possible for us to train in mindfulness. When we look at these two dimensions, the first question is: which aspect of our mind do we train to be mindful – the undercurrent or the observer? Before reading on, reflect on this question for a few minutes.

Exercise 1: Learning about your Undercurrent

30 minutes

Go through the usual practice of intention, motivation, settling, grounding, resting and mindfulness support of choice (sound, breath or body awareness).

Focus on your mindfulness support in a very relaxed way and be careful not to obstruct thoughts. In fact, from resting on the Mindfulness support open up to and develop an interest in any thoughts, emotions and sensations that arise in your mind.

Each time that you notice your mind wandering, come back to grounding in the body and resting and then rest part of your focus on your mindfulness support and once more open up to noticing any thoughts, emotions or sensations that are arising in your experience.

Now let go of the mindfulness support and just rest.

1.2 The Undercurrent can't be Changed

As we practice mindfulness we begin to notice thoughts popping into our minds. We do not intend to have these thoughts, they just arise of their own accord. We discover that the undercurrent is autonomous – that means it manifests by itself without any intention on our part. As we proceed with our training we will learn more – not only does it manifest by itself, but it is constantly fading away by itself. The result is that we experience a continual flow of thoughts and emotions arising, being present for a while and then passing, to be incessantly replaced by a new lot. This process almost never stops, and accounts for the difficulty we have in settling the mind – new thoughts are always popping up and attracting attention.

When we look at the content of the undercurrent, namely what kind of thoughts, feelings, emotions and mind states arise, we soon notice that it is always familiar. There is nothing new in it. Reflection on this fact reveals that the undercurrent is a product of the habits we have developed in the past; so it is throwing up habitual patterns of thinking and feeling that we constantly engage with and reinforce without fully realising what we are doing. When we try to break a habit we get some understanding of the strength of these patterns and the amount of energy that they embody because even when we don't want to think or feel in a particular way the undercurrent continues to take us there.

Consequently, we can see that the undercurrent is a manifestation of the past – all our past habits – and takes the form of a conditioned reflex in that it flows into consciousness in response to seen and unseen stimuli. Once we have observed this in our mindfulness practice, it leads to an interesting conclusion: the past cannot be changed. The undercurrent is the past; therefore the undercurrent cannot be changed, certainly not by direct intervention. It is absolutely crucial that we understand this point because if we don't we will attempt to change the content of the undercurrent and will end up suppressing, denying or negating our experience. This will result in a tangle of confusion in our minds, which will leave us worse off psychologically than if we had not attempted to do anything at all.

This realisation might be quite startling because it could suggest that change is therefore not possible. But don't worry – this is not the case. We simply need to be clear where change can be initiated in order to spare ourselves the confusion of attempting the impossible.

Change comes from the observer, and it is the observer that is trained when we learn to be mindful.

1.3 The Observer

Just as with the undercurrent, the observer is always there. As you are reading these words, it is the observer who is reading, reflecting on the ideas contained here, agreeing, disagreeing and so on.

If you reflect for a moment you will notice that the observer is dominated by a sense of self. It is the part of your psyche that says “this is me, I am here, I am thinking ...” So there is a sense of self and a sense of observing simultaneously present. Moreover, not only is there observing, there is a strong concern and interest in what is being observed – “Is this a nice thought that has popped up? Do I like the emotion that has arisen? Does this mind state make me feel good? ...”

The process is perpetually present along with the arising of the undercurrent. It reveals that there is an ongoing relationship between observer and undercurrent based on a system of vigilant surveillance continually maintained by the observer. What is more, this vigilance is driven by a powerful preference system that is built into the observer. So at any given moment the observer is watching the undercurrent with a strong motive – “do I like what is here? Do I not like it? Am I indifferent to it?”

Our Inner Environment

Now we have begun to sketch the terrain of our inner environment and have identified some of its main features. We have seen that there is a constantly flowing undercurrent of thoughts and feelings that are like an echo of the past because they arise out of habitual patterns that have been forged by actions we have done in the past. Since the undercurrent is like an echo – it is an effect rather than a cause - it cannot be changed by direct intervention. Simultaneously present is the observer - it observes the undercurrent with an attitude of preference and thinks “this is me....me....me”.

What Does the Observer Do?

Before we consider how to train the observer, let’s find out what it does. All our likes and dislikes, what we should do or should not do, what is good or bad, OK or not OK, arise within the observer. At first glance this may not seem to be a big deal, but in fact it is hugely significant because these attitudes shape our lives and determine whether we are happy or unhappy.

Emotions and thoughts arise within the undercurrent and can be painful, pleasant or neutral. But the undercurrent does not project a value judgment - it does not say: “this is good, that is bad; I want this, I hate that; this makes me happy, that freaks me out.” The observer continually scans the undercurrent with an attitude of preference and reacts to its content on the basis of that preference. In this way, all our feelings of good, bad, right, wrong or neutral in relation to the content of the undercurrent are projected onto it by the observer.

On the basis of its preference and reactivity, the observer gets ensnared in the following process - it tries to rearrange, “fix”, sanitise or get rid of what it does not like - “I want to get rid of my anger, I want to get rid of painful thoughts, I want to get rid of this depression.” When it finds that it cannot get rid of these experiences through direct intervention, it resorts to suppression and denial - “I don’t have those feelings ... I never get angry.” It then engages in self-deception - “I want to be happy and positive so I will only think positive thoughts; I will only have positive feelings; I will not have negative thoughts or feelings”. It then projects its own painful, unresolved psychological issues onto others and blames them for the way it feels.

This is a cruel and self-destructive stratagem that produces a despairing liar because it has no hope of working. The undercurrent, which is carrying all the things that the despairing liar doesn't want, is an echo that cannot be changed by direct intervention. The strategy of positive thinking does not take account of this - it works on the assumption that if I bury my head in the sand and only acknowledge light and love the negative stuff will go away. Well it does not because it fails to address the underlying cause which is that negative experiences arise out of powerful habit patterns that are rooted in past actions. When we try to superimpose a preferred alternative on what is actually there, we are unwittingly attempting to suppress the content of the undercurrent; but the bad news is that any attempt to suppress anything simply reinforces and strengthens it.

As mindfulness training progresses, we discover the full extent of the observer's activity, and gradually realise that what we think of as "ourselves" starts with identifying with the observer. This is why we often talk of "me and my thoughts" or "me and my feelings". It is the observer that believes it experiences the undercurrent and thus thinks it owns it.

Training the Observer

When we train in mindfulness it is the observer that we train. We have learnt about settling the mind, so in that context what we really mean is settling the observer – training it not to jump into the undercurrent every time a thought appears. We could even use the image of a person sitting on a river bank learning to observe the river flowing by instead of leaping into the water every time something interesting appears there.

1.4 Revisiting the Definition of Mindfulness

As we already know, the main element of our training involves bringing our attention back to the mindfulness support every time we drift away into distraction. Every time we return to the support we return to the present moment. When we learn to rest in the moment we begin to discover that everything that ever happens occurs in the moment. We don't notice a remarkable amount of what happens both inwardly and outwardly. Our training enhances our awareness of what is going on because we remain present with it, instead of drifting away into distraction, and thereby not seeing it.

We can now begin to develop a working definition of mindfulness: knowing what is happening while it is happening. This covers not only the fact of being in the moment, but includes being in the moment knowingly, instead of vaguely or dreamily. So there is an element of alert attentiveness, but in a way that is relaxed and open, not constricted and tense.

The next element we need to add to our definition is elusive and less easy to understand as it relates to the subtle attitudes of preference. As we saw before, the observer, without realising it, observes with preference and most of our suffering in life arises from our unconscious preferences.

Consequently, when we practice mindfulness we are training ourselves to become mindful of two things simultaneously: first, the flow of the undercurrent, and second, the attitude or preference with which the observer observes it. This second factor is very important because it forms the basis for all our judgments, evaluations and reactions to our inner environment.

This second aspect of our training involves learning to recognize preference and letting go of it, because preference results in not fully accepting how we are. For example, we might be practicing mindfulness and a feeling of anger arises. Most people don't like to feel angry so the preference system kicks in with

“I don’t like anger ... anger is bad ... I don’t want to feel it ... get rid of it ...” This attitude sets up a wide range of secondary reactions such as guilt, frustration, sense of failure and inadequacy. We don’t see that these feelings are all the result of not accepting the existence of anger in our mind and find that we are now beginning to feel bad instead of experiencing the tranquillity that mindfulness brings. This underlines the importance of learning to accept whatever arises in the undercurrent and gradually letting go of preference.

Therefore, we can now add a second phrase to our definition of mindfulness: without preference. So, to reiterate, our full definition of mindfulness is: *knowing what is happening while it is happening, no matter what it is.*

Exercise 2: Learning about your Observer

30 minutes

Go through the usual practice of intention, motivation, settling, grounding, resting and mindfulness support of choice (sound, breath or body awareness).

Focus on your mindfulness support in a very relaxed way and be careful not to obstruct thoughts. In fact, from resting on the mindfulness support open up to and develop an interest in any thoughts, emotions and sensations that arise in your mind. Continue to observe thoughts, emotions and images that arise in your mind, and notice your attitude to what is arising.

Then shift your attention to the observer, and ask, “What kind of observer do I have?” See if you can identify attitudes, preferences, assumptions, expectations and goals. It sometimes helps to make notes so that you build up a clear picture of what is there. In so doing you get to know your observer. Do this for about 15 minutes.

2. LIFE VALUES

LOVE AFTER LOVE

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome, and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

Derek Walcott

This is an idea taken from ACT – Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

Life values are deep down inside, what is important to you? What do you want your life to stand for? What sort of qualities do you want to cultivate as a person? How do you want to be in your relationships with others?

Values are our deepest desires for the way we want to interact and relate to the world, other people and ourselves. They are principles that can guide us and motivate us as we move through our lives. Values are not the same as goals. Values are the directions we can move in during our lives. They are like a compass bearing, like a heading East. We can keep travelling in the direction East forever, but never get there. For example, we may have a value that we want to live a mindful life. This is not something we can finish, it's an ongoing process. Likewise, we may have a life value of wanting to spend more quality time with friends or family and again this is an ongoing thing.

Secular mindfulness is often criticised for not explicitly having an ethical code. Exploring our life values can be an opportunity to explore our personal ethical code. We will all have one, but often it is hidden and subservient to other motivations, such as our own desires or the values and norms of our society or the people we live with. Bringing our own ethical code more into the forefront of our lives can provide guiding values that help us navigate our lives on a day to day basis. Often we live our lives and make decisions about how we live our lives, based on what other people think or based on norms or conventions, within our families or within our society or based on how we want other people to view us.

How would it be to live in accordance with our own life values, regardless of what others think? This could enable us to lead an authentic life, a meaningful life in which we can become more true to ourselves.

Life values are important in helping us with acceptance. Part of acceptance and part of self-compassion is a willingness to be with whatever arises within the internal environment of our mind. Sometimes this may mean having to stay present with fear, anger, upset. Acceptance can be an uncomfortable and sometimes relentless process – so why would we do it? We might be prepared to stay with the difficulty in the service of our life values.

Exercise 3: 80th Birthday Visualisation

30 minutes

Go through the steps of intention (to get in touch with deeply held life values), motivation (why we might want to do this for ourselves and others), settling, grounding, resting, mindfulness support of choice (breath, sound, body awareness).

Now imagine that it is your 80th birthday party and you arrive at your party and see all the decorations in the room and all your friends, family, teachers and other people who have inspired you or been important to you in your life. You can have anyone there and they can be of any age. No need to direct this too much, but just allow the imagining of the party and the guests at the party to emerge in its own way.

Now imagine that one of the guests gets up and makes a speech about your life, your successes, your strengths and good qualities (notice any feelings of embarrassment that arise and allow them to be), about what you have stood for and about what your life has stood for. Imagine that this person says everything that you most dearly want to hear and that they mean it completely. After a while this guest finishes and sits down.

Now imagine that a second one of the guests gets up and makes a speech about your life, your successes, your strengths and good qualities, about what you have stood for and about what your life has stood for. No need to direct this too much, but allow the imagining to unfold in its own way. Imagine that this person says everything that you most dearly want to hear and that they mean it completely. After a while this guest finishes and sits down.

Now imagine that a third one of the guests gets up. There is no need to direct this too much. You can just see who appears in your imagining. This third guest makes a speech about your life, your successes, your strengths and good qualities, about what you have stood for and about what your life has stood for. Imagine that this person says everything that you most dearly want to hear and that they mean it completely. After a while this guest finishes and sits down.

Now let go of the visualisation and rest without focus.

Reflection on Values

You might like to reflect on what life values the visualization highlighted and use the following questions (adapted from Kelly Wilson's Valued Living Questionnaire) to inspire your reflection.

Deep down inside, what is important to you? What do you want your life to stand for? What sort of qualities do you want to cultivate as a person? How do you want to be in your relationships with others? Values are our heart's deepest desires for the way we want to interact with and relate to the world, other people, and ourselves. They are leading principles that can guide us and motivate us as we move through life.

The following are areas of life that are valued by some people. Not everyone has the same values, and there are no "correct" or "incorrect" values. Think about each area in terms of general life directions, rather than in terms of specific goals. There may be certain areas that you don't value much; you may skip them if you wish. There may be areas that overlap – e.g. if you value hiking in the mountains, that may come under both physical health and recreation. It is also important that you write down what you would value if there were nothing in your way. What's important? What do you care about? And what you would like to work towards?

1. Family relations. What sort of brother/sister, son/daughter, uncle/auntie do you want to be? What personal qualities would you like to bring to those relationships? What sort of relationships would you like to build? How would you interact with others if you were the ideal you in these relationships?

2. Marriage/couples/intimate relations. What sort of partner would you like to be in an intimate relationship? What personal qualities would you like to develop? What sort of relationship would you like to build? How would you interact with your partner if you were the 'ideal you' in this relationship?

3. Parenting. What sort of parent would you like to be? What sort of qualities would you like to have? What sort of relationships would you like to build with your children? How would you behave if you were the 'ideal you'.

4. Friendships/social life. What sort of qualities would you like to bring to your friendships? If you could be the best friend possible, how would you behave towards your friends? What sort of friendships would you like to build?

5. Career/employment. What do you value in your work? What would make it more meaningful? What kind of worker would you like to be? If you were living up to your own ideal standards, what personal qualities would you like to bring to your work? What sort of work relations would you like to build?

6. Education/personal growth and development. What do you value about learning, education, training, or personal growth? What new skills would you like to learn? What knowledge would you like to gain? What further education appeals to you? What sort of student would you like to be? What personal qualities would you like to apply?

7. Recreation/fun/leisure. What sorts of hobbies, sports, or leisure activities do you enjoy? How do you relax and unwind? How do you have fun? What sorts of activities would you like to do?

8. Spirituality. What does spirituality mean to you? It may be as simple as communing with nature, or as formal as participation in an organised religious group. What is important to you in this area of life?

9. Citizenship/environment/community life. How would you like to contribute to your community or environment, e.g. through volunteering, or recycling, or supporting a group/charity/political party? What sort of environments would you like to create at home, and at work? What environments would you like to spend more time in?

10. Health/physical well-being. What are your values related to maintaining your physical well-being? How do you want to look after your health, with regard to sleep, diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol, etc? Why is this important?

3. NEGOTIATING OBSTACLES ALONG THE PATH

I SAID TO THE WANTING-CREATURE INSIDE ME

I said to the wanting-creature inside me:
What is this river you want to cross?
There are no travelers on the river-road, and no road.
Do you see anyone moving about on that bank, or nesting?
There is no river at all, and no boat, and no boatman.
There is no tow rope either, and no one to pull it.
There is no ground, no sky, no time, no bank, no ford!
And there is no body, and no mind!
Do you believe there is some place that will make the
soul less thirsty?
In that great absence you will find nothing.
Be strong then, and enter into your own body;
there you have a solid place for your feet.
Think about it carefully!
Don't go off somewhere else!
Kabir says this: just throw away all thoughts of
imaginary things,
and stand firm in that which you are.

Kabir

Here we are using the Bus Driver Metaphor from ACT – Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

It can be useful in a whole series of ways to think of ourselves as bus drivers! We're driving the bus of our life. We have a whole bunch of often unruly passengers in the back. The passengers are our thoughts and feelings. At times they can be a nuisance. Sometimes they shout out stuff like *"You're a useless driver"*, or *"You're going in the wrong direction"*, or *"There's too much racket in the back here. You should stop and come to deal with it"*, or a whole range of other potentially distressing/distracting feelings and mind noise.

This metaphor can help us to understand:

The importance of life values: It's hugely important for our health and wellbeing that we mostly focus on driving the bus in the right direction. In the direction of our life values, by what truly matters to us. Our values are the compass bearing which we need to steer by. The value we are dealing with just now is something like *"I want to live a mindful life"*, but this exercise can also be used in relation to other values.

Distinguishing values and goals: It's often helpful to distinguish values and goals. Values are likely to be compass bearings we use to steer by for many decades. We don't practice mindfulness for a while and then get to a place where we've arrived and can stop doing it. Cultivating mindfulness is a life's work. Certain current goals however we may well reach, such as attending this course or reading books

about mindfulness. Hopefully we'll achieve these goals and then we'll want to make fresh ones. It's like driving on a particular compass bearing (values) and seeing that some way ahead in this direction is a landmark (goal), maybe a tree or a hill that we can steer towards for a while. The landmark is the goal we head for as we follow our values compass. When we reach it, we look ahead on our compass bearing for the next landmark to steer towards. Values are the direction that we drive. Goals are checkpoints on the journey.

Values are not about the future, they're about now, today: This way of distinguishing ongoing values from checkpoint goals, leads to another realization. We live or don't live our values right now, today, moment by moment. Values (unlike goals) are not some destination that we're travelling towards. Values are the way that we are travelling, the way we make our journey. If my key values are to live with kindness to myself and others, then this is the direction, the way I want to travel. It's like saying "*I've decided to travel North-West. This is the compass bearing I'm going to follow.*" I can start to follow the compass of my values right now. If I'm heading North-West right now, then I'm doing it. It's not something I have to wait for or work towards. It's now.

Self-definition by values, not goal-achievements: There's a good deal of evidence that living a life rich in meaning and values promotes resilience in many different situations. For example, this has been found for people facing chronic pain, cancer, everyday life stresses, and for overall levels of wellbeing.

Mindfulness and dealing with unruly "bus passengers": We're driving the bus of our life. We have a whole bunch of often unruly passengers. Often our best strategy is simply to continue driving in the direction of our values and goals. Some of the passengers we all have at times in the back of our buses are anxiety, fear, depression, anger and worry. Mindfulness treats these mental contents as passing flow, like traffic noise outside our window, or like leaves floating past on a stream. Our task is to let the mind noise be, let it flow by. It's not what's important. It's part of being human and we can treat ourselves gently as we struggle with mental content. So our task is to realize that the mind noise is a normal part of the human condition, to treat ourselves with gentleness and encouragement, and to focus on what matters – in this case our value to live a mindful and kind life.

Bus Driver Metaphor

We are on our mindfulness journey. We have discovered that we would like to be more mindful and kind in our lives. However, we often come across obstacles along the road as we travel. Some may be external, but often they are from our internal environment. We can look at the metaphor of a driver of a bus. We drive our bus along the road towards our intended destination (which can our motivation to practice mindfulness).

We are the driver of the bus. We have our innate abilities and strengths in order to achieve this, and also skills from our mindfulness and compassion practice that we have developed/ing to come to our aid.

But we also have some unruly passengers in the back of our bus wreaking havoc and trying to distract us from reaching our destination. They shout out: "you're going the wrong way!", or, "Stop! I want to get off!", "You're a lousy driver", "You never get it right". These passengers represent our internal environment, obstacles to our journey, our worries, doubts and fears, our judgments, self-critic, our expectations. We need somehow to accept their presence, and yet continue in our intended direction.

We also may find that we have some helpful passengers, those that encourage us, help us on our journey, if we doubt we are on the right road, or get lost, or feel like giving up. These can be either

inanimate in the form of books, mindfulness journals etc., or animate such as friends, family members we know, spiritual teachers, even animals.

Finally, we come to look at our first practical goal along our road. What is the first manageable step we can take in order to help us on our mindfulness journey?

Exercise 4: Bus Driver Exercise

Using Coloured Pens – paper (Be as creative and playful as you like)

Draw Your Bus and you as the driver. On the front of your bus – write your intended destination.

Sitting back in posture

Go through the process of intention, motivation settling, grounding and resting and then drop in the following reflection questions. Not search for answers, but allowing any answers to arise and unfold on their own.

What are the obstacles (if any) on your mindfulness journey? Who are the unruly passengers wreaking havoc on your bus? (These can be in the form of a shape, colour, character, written) Write or draw these on the back of your bus.

What are your innate qualities – or/and developed/ing skills as the bus driver that will help you keep to your direction? Again, write or draw these on the back of your bus.

Are there any helpful passengers on your bus that can help keep you on the right road? Write or draw these on the back of your bus.

What might be the 1st manageable step – the first goal to head to along your journey towards your intended destination? Again, write or draw these on the back of your bus.

To end the practice rest without focus for a while.

HOME PRACTICE

Home Practice Going Forward – You Decide! Use the following questions to help your process of reflecting.

What are the main things I have learned on this course?

How will I implement what I have learned into my daily life?

What are my reasons for continuing to practice mindfulness after this course ends?

Realistically how many minutes per day do I want to commit to my daily formal mindfulness practice?

Which of the formal practices covered on this course would I like to do on a regular basis? (eg. sitting practice, bodyscan, mindful movement, loving kindness practice)

Which of the daily life practices covered on this course would I like to do on a regular basis? (eg. breathing space, compassion break, daily life activities)

What will I say to myself if I experience a resistance to continuing to practice mindfulness (eg. Nike slogan – just do it)