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# Building an ark: creating a vessel for the education of MBSR teachers

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This paper is a response to an invitation by the editors of this special issue to write a first person account about mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) teacher education as it developed within the Stress Reduction Clinic (SRC) and Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (CFM) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. As the founder of Oasis Institute, I have attempted to describe, in very personal terms, the *ground* out of which Oasis emerged and the ways this ground shaped the intention, educational trajectory, pedagogy, and infrastructure of Oasis Institute.

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“Start a huge, foolish project, like Noah . . . ” [1]

## Two kinds of intelligence

Eight centuries ago, the great Sufi teacher and poet, Jelaluddin Rumi, recited and wrote the *Masnawi* — six oceanic volumes about the human condition and the unfolding of the soul (consciousness) comprising 62 000 lines of poetry. Among the topics he speaks about is what he calls “two kinds of intelligence”:

“One that is acquired . . . one already completed and preserved inside you.” [2\*]

Since these two intelligences are a central feature of meditation and, by extension, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) teacher education as developed within Oasis Institute and disseminated around the world, this is a good place to begin.

## Acquired intelligence

At heart, the MBSR curriculum has remained true to the *form* it entered the world with in 1979. The basic structure of the program, the sequencing of meditation practices, and weekly class themes remain intact and robust. In the development of MBSR teachers, one aspect of their education is directed toward learning to teach the course content. These contents constitute the *instrumental* dimension of MBSR, Rumi’s ‘acquired’ intelligence. Acquired intelligence comes through practice, attainment of goals, and the development of skills and competencies described, observed, learned, understood, and experientially refined over time. This instrumental domain is of great value, expressing and reflecting one kind of intelligence.

## ‘Already completed’ intelligence

At heart, the MBSR curriculum has remained true to the *formlessness* it entered the world with in 1979. At the most basic level, you need a room to teach MBSR, a gathering place for people. You already inhabit a room that is always with you. This is the room of your heart. Rumi calls this placeless place:

“A freshness in the center of your chest.” [3]

Two centuries later Hafiz described it as:

“The city inside your chest.” [4\*\*]

This ‘freshness’ or ‘city’ is outside of space and time, outside of ‘acquired intelligence.’ This is the domain of *being*. The non-instrumental actuality of meditation and MBSR, the intelligence that is already complete within you and within those with whom we work. This intelligence does not need to be acquired but rather, *remembered*.

Like Russian Matryoshka dolls, the instrumental is *nested* within the non-instrumental intelligence. If this were not the case, how could we learn anything? How could we love anyone, if love were not an innate attribute? How could we ache and feel tenderness in the orbit of another’s pain, if empathy wasn’t inherent? Surely, we can learn to become increasingly attuned to these attributes through deliberateness and practice. However, if they were not already part and parcel of who and what we are, occluded as they may be in most of us, we would have no reference point for loving, compassionating, (as Walt Whitman says) [5] or assuming our measure of responsibility for the wellbeing of the world.

## The ground of Oasis Institute

### 1983–1992: the intensive clinical years

In the spring of 1981, Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of MBSR and clinic director, invited me to become the clinic's first intern. I jumped at the invitation, joined the SRC as assistant director two years later and stayed for 35 years. When I began working with Jon, I had been a serious student of meditation and yoga for 13 years. As the only other fulltime teaching/clinical staff member at that time, my job took the shape of a wide-ranging apprenticeship. Rigorous, intimate, and aligned with my ideals, this made for a rich learning environment. I was an eager student. Rumi enjoins us to, "Hope for a hard teacher." Jon was a hard teacher. Direct and exacting, often he was not easy. Most importantly, he was trustworthy. This counted for a lot. His expectations of me were high. He wanted nothing less of and for me than to continue discovering and teaching out of the depth and beauty of my being.

Two months into my work at the SRC, Jon and I were conversing about becoming an MBSR teacher. He said, "The job description is Zen master." I remember shuddering — one of those internal tremors that erupts when we are awed because we know that we have met what we love and that it will cost us more than we can imagine to surrender to that love. Within this challenging environment Jon offered me the time and space to grow, discover that beauty and find my own way into the teaching of mindfulness and MBSR.

Here's what my clinical work within the SRC entailed. Six months of the year I conducted 45 to 60-min Intake and Exit interviews with every patient referred to the SRC and all those who completed the program. The other 6 months I taught MBSR programs. It was not unusual for me to conduct in 75–100 Intake interviews before each clinic cycle (Fall, Winter and Spring and eventually Summer) and 60–70 Exit interviews. A case study of each participant interview was dictated, then reviewed in written form before being sent to referring physicians and entered into the patient's medical record. Integral to my clinical work, these reports served multiple functions including: 1) educating our referring providers about the experience of their patients in the MBSR program and 2) educating me about how to speak clearly and contextually to the medical and scientific communities about mindfulness and its integration into mainstream medical care. In addition, between teaching cycles I developed and taught programs for MBSR program graduates two to three times per year, participated in weekly teacher's meetings and a range of other clinical activities. Added to this, four years after starting my job, I began teaching a section of our professional *Internship in MBSR* two to three times per year. Together, these responsibilities constituted nearly 2000 hours of MBSR clinical time annually.

Across these first nine years of my life in the SRC, I was immersed in a close relationship with Jon, a small and growing cohort of colleagues and, most importantly, thousands of patients referred to our clinical service by their physicians. My patients taught me far more than I taught them. They were patient with me, helping me learn how to teach mindfulness in a non-sectarian clinical setting and make it accessible and useful to them without watering down the essential practice.

Then, in 1990, everything changed. The SRC was featured in the Bill Moyers documentary, *Healing and the Mind* [6\*\*]. What had been quietly unfolding for 11 years within three small offices in the basement of UMass Medical Center had now been seen by 40 million people.

### 1993–1999: expansion and diversification

Jon's book, *Full Catastrophe Living* [7\*\*], became a best-seller and research about the potential benefits of mindfulness and MBSR was beginning to accumulate. Healthcare professionals and lay people from around the world contacted us because they wanted to learn to practice mindfulness and MBSR. Many of these professionals were longtime mindfulness practitioners inspired by the possibility of integrating mindfulness into their work and close the gap between their professions and what they loved. In response, Jon and I developed and began teaching an intensive residential course entitled, *MBSR in Mind-Body Medicine*. We taught in three locations annually working with more than 550 physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers.<sup>1</sup> The accumulated experience across 16 years of pioneering work in the SRC set the stage for the founding of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society by Jon in 1995. Likewise, the seeds for the founding of Oasis Institute had been sown within me.

In very new ways, the world was beginning to awaken to mindfulness. The integration and potential expressions of mindfulness in fields as diverse as medicine, neuroscience, education, corrections, business, law, and athletics created enormous possibilities for introducing mindfulness and MBSR to many more people. With the establishment of the CFM, I became the SRC director, assuming major responsibility for the supervision and mentoring of new clinic teachers and those of us working in prisons, private corporations, public institutions, and our free, inner city clinic. Meanwhile, the physicians across the region were referring large numbers of patients to our service. By example, in 1997, the SRC had nearly 8000 patient visits to our MBSR program. During the same period of time we added a third program to our

<sup>1</sup> Together, we taught this course for 23 years engaging with more than 10 000 healthcare professionals and educators on four continents.

teacher education process – the *Teacher Development Intensive* – and my book, *Heal Thy Self*, was published [8].

Earlier I described a conversation that Jon (Kabat-Zinn) and I had about the job description of an MBSR teacher as ‘Zen master.’ Three decades later, speaking together again about the same topic, I reminded him of that conversation. He said, “I meant it as a metaphor.” For me, it was never a metaphor nor do I think it was it for my CFM colleagues who became the founding core of Oasis Institute. Casting aside all the images and exoticism conjured by the image, ‘Zen master,’ we took this ‘job description’ seriously. Fortunately, we also held it lightly, sensing that we were being true to the spirit and substance of our work and good enough to stay the course and continue our exploration. We knew that we were learning and *unlearning*. Delighted in being students, we thrived by living into the *interior* work of the SRC: the purposeful and persistent cultivation of a highly skilled clinical staff intent on *embodying* mindfulness while simultaneously studying, reflecting upon, understanding and transmitting the contemplative, theoretical, philosophical, ethical, and educational foundations underpinning our approach.

As a teaching staff we were engaged in thousands of patient/participant visits annually. This was our service, the heart of our work; the crucible within which we learned what it would really require of us to teach others to teach MBSR. Compelled by imagination and informed by the scientific method we’d been engaged in a 20-year experiment: we collected data; we let the data direct our efforts; we ran new experiments; we kept good lab notes; we conducted research and wrote papers; we talked together all the time about both what we were learning and about how to optimize our relationships with our patients, medical, and research colleagues and the larger public. We met every week as a teaching staff promising ourselves that we’d tell the truth about what was humbling and embarrassing, downright difficult and exhilarating about our attempts to *meet* the program participants in our classes. I emphasize this latter point because the attempt to teach others to teach MBSR arose out of a particular labor — a long labor that required a willingness to being undone by opening ourselves over and over again to the alchemical processes of dissolution and reintegration. This was the same process our MBSR participants were experiencing. How could we possibly ask any less of ourselves and maintain any semblance of credibility, authenticity, and depth?

#### 2000–2001: change and a vision of the future

Jon stepped aside as the executive director of the CFM in July 2000. I became the executive director. Three months later, facing a huge institutional debt fueled by a merger, the hospital system began jettisoning a host of clinical services. The SRC was ‘eliminated’ from the clinical

system. Coupled with the loss of clinical revenue associated with the SRC’s change in status, an institutional audit revealed that we were in significant debt. Virtually overnight we were forced into making life and death decisions about closing our doors or envisioning a new future. This was a time of not knowing that I wrote about in vivid detail [9]. Then 9/11 arrived. Like it or not, we were thrown into a whole new world that asked for nothing less than enormous faith, patience, and vision.

#### The founding of Oasis Institute

The ‘ground’ of Oasis was 22 years of MBSR clinical care comprising nearly 170 000 MBSR patient visits. Coupled with the commitment to research, professional education, and dissemination that had been in place for two decades, my colleagues and I were standing upon the shoulders of many colleagues who’d been committed members of the CFM. Two of them, both who transitioned out of the CFM the year before Oasis was founded were Jon Kabat-Zinn and Ferris Buck Urbanowski. Jon and Ferris contributed mightily, each in their own unique ways to the founding and development of MBSR teacher education and, as well, the unfolding of MBCCT.

Oasis was formally established at 8:00 in the morning on September 11th, 2001. My colleagues, Melissa Blacker, Florence Meleo-Meyer and Elana Rosenbaum<sup>2</sup> and I met that day before we had any idea about what was soon to transpire at the World Trade Center, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania. The name, ‘Oasis’ emerged out of a vision at the end of one of my meditations. With tremendous vividness, this image arrived unbidden: people sitting together around shimmering pools of sweet water, surrounded by tall palm trees and emerald green vegetation nestled within the sand dunes of a vast desert landscape. What better ideal than to found a school whose primary intention was to offer substance, sustenance, and companionship in the often arid, competitive, overly conceptual and theoretical landscape of professional training.

#### Rejoining what had been separated

Well before the establishment of Oasis, I had a keen interest in researching the ancient roots of western medicine and healing. I was particularly interested in the possibility of suffusing both first and third person perspectives into the patient–provider relationship and how a deeper and more direct appreciation of both objective and subjective evidence might alter our view and enhance our understanding of illness, healing, and health [10••]. As it

<sup>2</sup> Melissa and Florence co-directed Oasis for many years. Melissa left the CFM and became the Abbot of the *Boundless Way Zen Center* and Florence assumed sole directorship. Together, they have had a profound and global influence on the shaping of MBSR teacher education. Elana resigned as a CFM staff member in 2002, continuing to mentor MBSR student teachers, teach mindfulness to cancer patients and healthcare professionals across the USA and write three beautiful books.

turned out, these perspectives were embodied in two distinct yet interdependent approaches to healing existing side by side in ancient Greece. These included Hippocratic medical schools located at Cos and Knidos and the Asklepiian healing schools at Cos and Epidaurus. One school represented the rational, objective, third person approach to illness and health, the other the subjective, patient-centered, first person approach to illness and healing. It appears that these two ‘schools’ interfaced and complimented one another [11\*].

My intention was to reunite what had been separated: objective from subjective, body from mind, biology from emotion, strength from vulnerability, instrumental from non-instrumental, inner from outer, individuality from oneness. And, while Oasis was explicitly focused on the development of MBSR teachers, its tacit and more radical goals aimed at 1) creating a vehicle supportive of the experiential awakening of healthcare professionals to their fundamental wholeness whether or not they ever became MBSR teachers, 2) restoring the power and promise of these interpenetrating realities to the modern worlds of medicine and psychology, and 3) developing a pathway of wise livelihood for people who sought to place mindfulness at the center of their lives personally and professionally. In our view, this could only be remotely possible if meditation practice in all its dimensionality became both the bedrock beneath and the river streaming through every aspect of MBSR teacher education.

Ah, and above and beneath all these goals, I hoped that Oasis students would come to discover within themselves that:

“It is our suffering, our broken heart, that gives us insight into the suffering of others. Not pity but sharing in the suffering ourselves because we, too, have known sorrow and loss. The extraordinary thing is that the insight of the heart is the magic that unleashes talents and potentialities within people that have been blocked as a result of their suffering.” [12\*]

### Transmitting the essence of MBSR into a school of professional education

Transmitting all these experiences and intentions into a school required us to take up the hard work of: developing curricula that integrated the instrumental and non-instrumental dimensions of mindfulness, creating experiential, didactic, and sequentially understandable pedagogy, conveying in a non-sectarian setting the theoretical underpinnings of MBSR found within classical Buddhist meditation and psychology and western psychology, medicine, and education, and being completely transparent and upfront about the necessity

of aspiring MBSR teachers to take up a daily mindfulness practice and engage in rigorous and ongoing silent retreat training with highly-qualified meditation teachers.

Supporting all this required a substantive infrastructure. We had to create admission standards, mentoring and supervision structures, a wide range of assessment criteria, live, online, and blended learning methodologies, continuing education programs, databases and, most importantly, a means of meeting the individual needs of professionals from around the world intent on teaching MBSR in their local communities and who were relying on Oasis for support and sustenance.

To give you a sense of what we were facing, in the years 2010 through 2017 Oasis Institute received between 1000 to 1600 admission applications annually. Handling such volume, while supporting the individual and collective needs of an increasingly diverse population of learners, took specialized ‘intelligences’ evident in a gifted and highly committed teaching faculty and administrative staff guiding and supporting people and programs across the planet. When I retired as the executive director of the CFM in 2017, Oasis Institute had educated 20 000 professionals in more than 80 countries.

What I am describing sometimes felt to me like “a huge, foolish project” fraught with potential folly and impossible to fully accomplish in a lifetime. Yet, I can’t imagine anything more worthwhile and enlivening than attempting to actualize this intention. Simply put, Oasis Institute represented a rare opportunity to free contemplative practice from its relatively narrow confines and assume a measure of responsibility for furthering human wellbeing in a world discontent and desperately in need.

### Building an ark

MBSR teacher education is serving a vital need for people in a world too busy, too distracted, and too disconnected for its own wellbeing. No doubt, MBSR as a form will have its time and, one day, will transform into something else. The *huge and foolish project* in the epigraph that opens this paper is not simply the furthering of MBSR or MBSR teacher education. These are stations along the way of a much more inclusive journey. I liken the development of Oasis Institute and its mission to the crafting of one sturdy rib into the hull of seaworthy vessel — a vessel capable of respecting and joining the contemplative traditions of the east with our own western contemplative, scientific and philosophical richness. If Oasis fulfills this one-rib-mission, this will be enough. Other organizations have and will continue to add their ‘ribs.’ Then, motivated by love and working in harmony, together we will co-create the real ark — a beautiful, dependable vessel for myriad beings’ intent

on rising above the current flood of delusion inundating the planet by awakening to their deepest and most luminous inheritance.

### Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

### References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
  - of outstanding interest
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