

## **Being with Malcolm – a journey in mindfulness**

I'd like to be clear about this from the start – I don't 'DO' meditation, nor do I 'DO' yoga . . . and I most certainly do not 'DO' poetry. In fact I don't 'DO' much that connects me to the present moment but rather I inhabit a world of anticipation and terror at the prospect of a future, distress and regret about the past, and a deep nostalgia for the summer of '73 – the most fondly remembered summer of my childhood.

That was at least partly how I saw myself until 2009, when miraculously my iron grip on this view relaxed sufficiently to allow me to enrol in a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course. What had I signed up for? I wasn't quite sure but a voice deep inside knew it would be 'good for me'. I was uncertain whether I'd be able to 'do it' or whether I'd even 'get it'. Although I was excited about this new journey I was to embark upon, my skepticism remained robust, after all mindfulness does come under the umbrella of meditation and as I said previously 'I don't DO meditation'.

That first night of the MBSR program, my exciting new journey began, though not with an "om" but with a raisin. We were each given a raisin and asked not to eat it immediately but instead, to examine and experience it using each of our senses. As I slowly rolled the raisin around between my fingertips I noticed intricacies of a raisin's texture that I'd never been aware of and as I inhaled deeply and relished in its sweetness, I marveled at the complexity of this nourishing little package in my hand. As I held my raisin up to my ear and gently squeezed it I delighted in the tiny squishing and crinkling sounds it made. Finally my taste buds were allowed to indulge and as I moved the raisin around my mouth with my tongue, I was surprised at the variety and richness of flavours I tasted, ranging from sugary and fruity to spicy and even sour. My perception of the humble raisin had changed forever, and with it began a new life of moving towards .... I wasn't quite sure, but knew it was a place I'd never been before.

But I shan't get ahead of myself here, as I recall vividly my first breath meditation and thinking beforehand that it would be a doddle – I mean what could be easier than sitting comfortably and focusing on the breath for 15 minutes? The bells to begin the meditation sounded and even before the second ring my mind was racing off to prepare dinner and berating myself for forgetting to buy garlic at the market, which would result in a trip to the supermarket after class, which in turn would make dinner even later and consequently I wouldn't get my work finished that night and therefore the following morning's meeting would be a schamozzle and that would flow on into the whole day and ..... and on and on it went. By the end of that meditation my life appeared pretty much a disaster through to Christmas!

Over the following eight weeks of the MBSR program we sampled a smorgasbord of mindfulness practices – both formal and informal. Whilst I can't claim to have really 'got it' during that time I was starting to discover a place that I'd never known before –

that place being 'now', the present moment. I'd spent all my life running furiously to avoid this place and in those early meditations it took all my strength and courage to keep myself there, on the seat or on the mat. I felt as though every cell in my body was screaming at fever pitch to run as far away as possible and my skin was trying to peel itself off my body. But somewhere down the track the present moment began to reveal itself and it came not during a meditation but at home one night in the kitchen.

I'd arrived home from work and had the usual tasks lined up to finish before my partner came home – nothing exciting, just the run of the mill evening activities. In my usual fashion I began six or so tasks in rapid succession and spent 10 minutes quickly and anxiously flitting between them – getting nowhere except closer to panic. Then something happened . . . I stopped . . . and contemplated the informal mindfulness practices we'd discussed in class and the notion of being awake and focused – I wondered if I could apply this in the kitchen. I decided to take one task at a time and give it my full attention – the novelty was overwhelming and the most amazing thing happened. I felt as if the world had stopped and I was moving in slow motion as I created each item of our dinner. There was no rushing, there was space for every task to unfold and I was fully focused on each action in each moment. I carefully and mindfully finished the preparations and moved onto the next task and gave it my same clear undivided attention. In half an hour I'd completed all my tasks and felt calm, centred and strangely fulfilled. That was my first "woo-hoo" moment!

Over the coming weeks we investigated practices such as Mindfulness of the Breath, Body Scan, Thoughts and Feelings, and Loving Kindness. We also gained insight into the physiological and psychological implications of stress – the former in itself being enough to propel one into a regular meditation practice ... it's a killer!

Eventually the 8 week course ended and I bid sad farewells to the people I'd grown to respect and feel enormous compassion for – we had courageously traversed exciting new territory together and each experienced our own apprehensions, struggles and joys in doing so.

I remember feeling strangely alone and like a baby bird leaving the nest as I left that night and wondered .... what next ... will this go anywhere? How can I build on what I've learned and not only further my knowledge and understanding of my very new and tentative meditation practice, but keep it going in the isolation of my home, without the support of my fellow travellers.

Around about this point my obsession with Buddhist literature hit me and I began devouring everything I could get my hands on, ranging from the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Pema Chodron, through to Jack Kornfield, Ethan Nichtern and Stephen Batchelor.

I managed to maintain a regular practice and at various times even meditated 3 times each day. The benefits I felt from this were overwhelming and although I could never claim to be 'awake' in the grand sense of the Buddha's awakened state, something in me was totally different and the world of the present was beginning to look like a pretty interesting place and one I could actually inhabit .... not all the time (that would be bragging) but one that I could find in both my formal and informal daily practices.

2010 arrived and I continued on my quest and my reading feast ... it picked up momentum and even clarity paid me a visit from time to time. I put to the back of my mind thoughts about why I hadn't discovered this 20 years ago and reveled in my new discoveries here and now, knowing that the time was right and ripe.

Just when life began to feel a little safer and 'interesting' a rather timely (in hindsight) challenge arose. Since I was a child I'd had a phobia of the sound of mosquitoes, they have always driven me to the point of insanity. I started to become aware and very troubled by a sound in my left ear at night which transformed from minor irritation to fully blown panic, once I realised that I had developed tinnitus and no ... it couldn't have manifested as any other sound, than that of a mosquito!!! AAARRRGGGHHH!

I related my tale of woe to all my friends ... I was on the verge of total insanity, couldn't sleep and certainly couldn't meditate ... I was certain to be the first known casualty of death by tinnitus – the sound drove me absolutely crazy! I decided to name this most irritating mosquito in my head 'Malcolm' as it was the most annoying name I could come up with and having been a teacher, I'd known a few Malcolms in my time.

I consulted professionals about my sad and sorry situation but my options appeared to be minimal other than taking medication which would possibly numb the annoyance minimally at best. I knew this wasn't an ultimate solution and also something in me had changed through the MBSR course and I wanted to take a new path to finding a liveable solution to this problem. Having said that, I continued to struggle with and against Malcolm. I wrestled, fought and cursed him in my head, ran faster and faster in my head until I was left exhausted, angry and frustrated – not to mention feeling like a total meditation failure!

During this time of what felt like constant torture, I started reading back through the MBSR Manual for inspiration ... I even re-read the poetry! One poem in particular demanded my attention over and over – Rumi's 'The Guest House' .....

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
Who violently sweep your house  
Empty of its furniture,*

*Still, treat each guest honourably.  
He may be clearing you out  
For some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
Meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,  
Because each has been sent  
As a guide from beyond.*

Something in the last stanza specifically touched me at some deeper level, a level of knowing that's not quite conscious but there is a feeling of it being somehow 'right'. At this deeper level I could see that the problem was more in my resistance to Malcolm and that while I continued fighting, I was just going down the same habituated path that wasn't going to assist in any way to resolving my situation.

I realised it was a matter of getting up close and personal with Malcolm in meditation – despite my inner protestations it wasn't going to happen any other way. I needed to turn gently towards Malcolm, let go of the struggle and learn to 'be' with him. So with these thoughts in my head I starting visiting Malcolm but now with a renewed focus: curiosity, interest, engagement, beginner's mind and any other tools I could find in my tiny little meditation toolkit – I hoped humour was in there somewhere as I tentatively and with a certain amount of terror, tried to actually listen to Malcolm.

My first few attempts to 'be' with Malcolm were short, frustrating and upsetting. I found I couldn't sustain focus on him at all (note that by this stage 'HE' had become a personality in his own right!). My level of tolerance was so low I felt I was being propelled away from the sound whenever I tried to listen. I persevered in very small doses until a very slight shift occurred that allowed me to actually just breathe and listen to Malcolm for the first time.

This shift was about letting go of the struggle (for a short period of time), being kind to myself and not trying to force anything, other than to listen and become interested in and curious about Malcolm.

I decided to concentrate on the qualities of the sound, just as I'd focused on the qualities of the breath in meditation. I discovered that the buzzing I thought was

ALWAYS there, was at times continuous and other times like a radio going on and off the station. Sometimes it was quite intense and penetrating but then would transform to being soft and dull. My musical background possibly assisted with my sense of interest as I noted the changes in pitch, volume, timbre and even rhythm from time to time. All of my little discoveries about Malcolm blew me away as I realised that my head talk about him was vastly different to the reality.

At some point during this process and probably two or three months after Malcolm first 'arrived' I was talking with a friend who asked me if that horrid, annoying little 'so and so' Malcolm had gone away yet. I noticed then and there that my relationship with Malcolm had changed entirely and I felt quite offended (on his behalf) at being called such cruel names .... and the ones above are only the printable ones!!

I hadn't realised until this point that I'd actually made friends with Malcolm – remember the 'thing' so annoying that was certainly going to render me a death by tinnitus statistic! I noticed that at the start of my meditations I'd just check in with Malcolm to see if he was there, making his little self known in the background. He was always there and possibly always would be but had moved from being very much 'in my face', to being on the periphery of my experience and was not the focus or total annoyance of my entire world. I was learning how to 'be' with Malcolm.

Several months after this slightly mind blowing revelation I went overseas and remember being a little worried on the plane as I couldn't hear Malcolm. When I finally arrived at my destination, a quiet little Scottish town, I was overjoyed that he hadn't missed the flight after all and was with me as a constant reminder of the incredible and life changing journey of meditation I'd been on thus far.

It's now 2 years since I began meditating ... I still practice daily (for the most part) both formally and informally, and read voraciously. When I look back at the person I was prior to embarking on this journey in mindfulness I find her almost unrecognisable. My world feels like it is slowly opening up, with possibilities for the future appearing. Something has shifted and softened and I now feel that I have a few more tools to equip me in dealing with life's challenges. Malcolm is still very much with me but I definitely see him as an ally these days and at times when I'm particularly distressed and in need of comfort, I find myself listening closely to all the variations in his tone and pitch as I drift off to sleep.

As I reflect on Rumi's poem I wouldn't say I necessarily 'welcome and entertain' all visitors but I am grateful for the arrival of Malcolm and what he has taught me. I wonder how many more 'Malcolms' will come to visit, and in so doing, help me learn valuable lessons as I continue to cultivate this new and exciting path through life.