

Overview of Workshop 3: Qualities

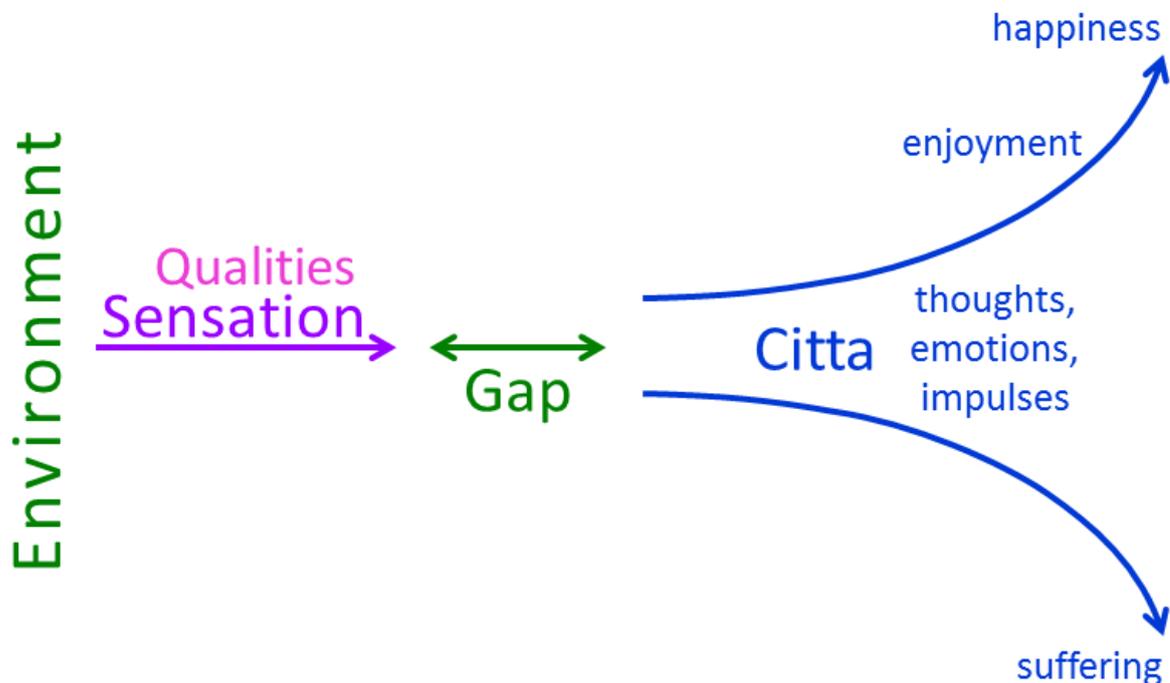
- Review of the second week
- Exploring Qualities of experience in different senses
- The Gap Chart – a model of how the mind works
- Approach Mode (instead of Auto-Pilot)
 - Savouring pleasure
 - Exploring the neutral & finding more life in it
 - Becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable
- Chocolate Meditation
- Practice for the third week

Review of the Second Week

What worked well for you in the second week? What did you learn?



The Gap Chart



The Gap Chart is a very simple model of the mind.

From our **environment**, we get various **sensations** – the light reflected off the paper you’re reading this on, the sounds around you, the feeling of the chair you’re sitting in, maybe some lingering tastes from what you last ate or drank,....

Each of these sensations has **qualities**. A taste might be bitter or sweet. A light might be bright or dim. A touch might be rough or smooth. In particular, these qualities may be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Sensations and their qualities are a given – we can’t control them. But we *can* have some control over how we respond. The more of a **gap** we can create between stimulus and response, the more chance we have of responding well.

Our response comes in the form of thoughts, emotions and impulses. These aren’t separate - emotions have a cognitive component to them, thoughts have an emotional component, and so on. (If you don’t believe me, try feeling kind and gentle when your head is full of thoughts of what other people have been doing wrong!). To recognise how thoughts, emotions and impulses are all interlinked, we call them **cittas** – a word which includes all 3.

Cittas have **direction**. Some cittas lead to suffering, while others lead to enjoyment and happiness. In the heat of the moment, we often make unwise choices, and end up creating unnecessary suffering. But with a gap between sensations and response, we can make wiser choices. In this way, we can start to guide ourselves away from suffering and towards more enjoyable and happier states of mind.



Qualities: Pleasant/Neutral/Unpleasant

Note down some sensations in your experience right now that fit into each of these categories:

Pleasant

Neutral

Unpleasant



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shakya@briefmindfulness.com

+44-(0)-7981-097768

www.briefmindfulness.com

Approach Mode

Fleeing an Owl or Seeking out Cheese?

In a 2001 experiment at the University of Maryland, students were asked to solve a simple puzzle. They were given a picture of a maze, with a mouse in the middle. They had to draw a line from the centre of the maze to the exit, to show the mouse the way out.

For some of the students, there was a piece of delicious-looking cheese at the exit of the maze. For the others, there was no cheese, but a picture of an owl that was ready to pounce on the mouse.

Then they were asked to do a creativity task. The group who'd been helping the mouse find the cheese did *twice as well* as the group who had been fleeing the owl.

What's going on here?

Fleeing the owl – even in imagination – puts the brain into “avoidance mode.” This is about survival – it closes down options and brings about an increased sense of vigilance and caution.

Seeking the cheese, on the other hand, puts the brain into “approach mode.” This is characterised by increased playfulness and creativity, less caution and more willingness to experiment. In approach mode we're more open to new experiences.

If that's what happens when we imagine a threat for a mouse depicted as a cartoon on a piece of paper, what about in real life? When we're working with a motivation of fear, the amygdala activates and diverts resources to large muscle groups, ready for flight or fight. It down-regulates the pre-frontal cortex, where clear rational thinking takes place. Fear gives you a lobotomy!

Approach Mode in Action

How about when you're putting off a challenging task? That's a classic case of Avoidance Mode. The challenging project is uncomfortable, so naturally your mind keeps turning away from it to something more comfortable.

In approach mode, however, you turn *towards* the uncomfortable sensation. You examine it, like a curious scientist. What's it like? How is it changing? How painful is it *really*?

Often we find that the task is much more bearable than we feared. When we finally get going we wonder what the fuss was all about – it's often a huge relief. And when we've completed the challenge, doesn't that feel great?

That's the approach mode in action. When we're trying to escape unpleasant sensations, we can get caught up in all sorts of distracting behaviour. But when we're willing to be with our experience just as it is, there's a palpable sense of freedom and relief. We're not fighting ourselves any longer, so we can just get on with things (or stop and enjoy the moment.)



	<i>Pleasant</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Unpleasant</i>
<i>Auto-Pilot</i>	<i>Crave more</i>	<i>Restlessness & distraction</i>	<i>Avoid</i>
<i>Approach Mode</i>	<i>Savour</i>	<i>Stay with & explore</i>	<i>Approach (after including some pleasure)</i>

Approaching Discomfort

This doesn't just happen with difficult tasks – it tends to happen with any uncomfortable or even painful sensation. Our mind sees it as a threat and tries to get away from it.

At the simple biological level, this avoidance makes perfect sense – if the fire gets too hot, move away quick before it burns us!

But sometimes discomfort isn't like that. Some level of physical discomfort is inevitable, and if we're going to be happy we need to accept that. Otherwise we can end up like the princess with the pea under her mattress, demanding ever more mattresses to avoid feeling the pea. All the effort to get more and more layers is itself painful. Not only that, but taking this path makes us more sensitive to discomfort - taken to extreme, this would make life utterly unbearable.

The alternative is to turn our minds *towards* the discomfort, and get interested in it, what it's like and how it's changing. The discomfort often turns out to be a lot less than we feared, and much easier to be with.

A key quality here is curiosity – the mind of a kind and curious scientist, or a child amazed by all the life in a little rock-pool. When we can observe our experience in this way, life becomes a lot easier. We're happier with things just as they are – and more open to the pleasures life has to offer.

Approaching Pleasure: Savour it.

The approach-mode is useful for pleasurable sensation too. In auto-pilot we tend to notice the taste of the first mouthful – and then after that it loses its novelty and we stop noticing. But we know it's nice so we crave more, taking our mind into the future, maybe even worrying if we'll get more.

So there's a lot more pleasure available in our experience, just as it is, if only we stay with it and notice. All we have to do is stop and savour the pleasurable sensations, explore them and delight in them. That is the "discipline of delight."

Approaching the Neutral: Stay with it and Explore

The third category of sensation is neutral – neither pleasant nor unpleasant. If there's too much neutral sensation around, we tend to get bored. That leads to restlessness and distraction, when can end up in quite destructive behaviour.

Once more the solution is to use the approach mode – to turn towards experience, to explore it and find out what's really there. This takes some patience – after all, the neutral doesn't seem very interesting – but the result can be a much richer experience of life.



Mindful Activity

Mindfulness isn't an interlude – it's a quality of mind and an approach to experience that you can take into whatever you're doing. (The purpose of all these meditations, Reconnects and so on is to cultivate the skills and habits, so that you have strong enough "mindfulness muscles" to bring to more challenging situations).

So this week we're going to bring Mindfulness into different types of activity.

Eating

In the class, we do a chocolate meditation! The idea of this is to notice what it's like to eat really mindfully, and how different that is to the way we normally eat. (You can find a guided chocolate meditation by Mark Williams at <http://tinyurl.com/choc-meditation>).

Now it's not realistic to eat quite that slowly in everyday life. But you can still choose to enjoy the pleasant sensations of eating, even at a more normal speed.

Walking

What do you do with your mind when you're walking somewhere? It's a time when you have choice about what to do with your mind, so why not use it as an opportunity to practice mindfulness?

I suggest you choose a walk you do anyway – this isn't about adding more things to your busy schedule! If you don't walk but you cycle, run or do some other form of exercise, that would work well too.

Choose a walk (or similar) that's between 5 and 15 minutes long. Any less and it hardly counts – and any longer and you'll find it hard to sustain practice.

And remember that it's just like a meditation. Choose a particular focus, e.g. the sensations in your feet. You can change the focus each day, and even within each walk – as long as you do it consciously, and always know what your chosen focus is. Also as in meditation, expect your mind to get interested in other things – and when you notice, that's a magic moment! Congratulate yourself for noticing, note what's captured your attention, and allow it to fade into the background as you bring your chosen focus back into the foreground of your awareness.

Simple Everyday Activity

Choose another simple activity (washing up, showering, brushing your teeth etc etc) and bring mindfulness to that. As with walking, choose a particular focus, e.g. the feel of the water on your skin, and come back to that whenever you have a magic moment.

Start with a Reconnect

I suggest starting each of these mindful activities (eating, walking and the other activity) with a Reconnect – to help you reconnect with mindfulness and engage with the activity.



Week 3 Brief Mindfulness Activities

Mindful Walk

What is your daily mindful walk?

How will you remind yourself?

Mindful Activity

What will be your mindful activity?

How will you remind yourself?

Reconnect

What are the regular times you will Reconnect?

What are the early signs of stress that will prompt you to Reconnect?

Body Scan – 15 minutes

When will you do your Body Scan?

Qualities of Experience

In the diary, note down examples of pleasant, neutral and unpleasant sensations you notice during any of the the mindful activities.

Remember to savour your MAGIC MOMENTS!



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Week 3 Diary

	15 minute Body Scan	Mindful Activity	Mindful Walk	What sensations did you notice that were....		
				...pleasant	...neutral	...unpleasant
				When did you do?	When did you do?	When did you do?
Mon	<i>In the class!</i>					
Tues						
Weds						
Thurs						



