

Introduction to Enquiry for teaching meditation – adapted from Breathworks

What is Enquiry?

Enquiry can be very useful when learning/deepening meditation. During enquiry a teacher, after guiding a meditation practice, engages in a gentle, investigative dialogue with one or more class participants, to encourage them to explore more fully the experiences they have had during the practice, and learn from these. It is embodied listening – and thus a form of mindfulness practice in itself. Enquiry gives course participants an opportunity to feel heard and ‘felt’, and to experience kind, connected, presence in a way that may open new ways for them to relate to themselves and their experience. It can also be used highly effectively in one-to-one meditation reviews.

Enquiry is a means for enabling meditators to:

- ***Become aware of and connect with their own direct experience***

Enquiry is a **mutual exploration** of what teacher and participants have noticed in their **direct experience** during a practice or exercise.

- ***Become aware of their relationship to that experience***

Enquiry can support participants to build their skills in mindfulness/compassion/Insight etc through the process of bringing curiosity, kindness and care to their own felt experience.

Through the enquiry process, participants learn to “lean into” their experience with a non-judgmental, kindly awareness, from which they can begin to understand **how they relate to their experience** (i.e. primary and secondary experience).

- ***Make meaning of their experience and relationship to it***

This learning provides a foundation of awareness from which meditators can begin to work flexibly and creatively with whatever arises in meditation. This learning of course translates into daily life as well. Enquiry helps participants make choices about the way they wish to relate to themselves and their experience so as to transform their suffering and move towards freedom.

Experiential learning

Enquiry is a tool that helps meditators learn through experience, rather than ‘thinking about things’ in our usual way. Practitioners learn to internalise this practice of reflection and gentle inner investigation, bringing a combination of curiosity and compassion towards whatever they are experiencing.

Carrying out a period of enquiry is therefore a really good opportunity for meditation teachers to embody mindfulness in how they relate to others’ experience, whatever that may be (rather than getting hung up on asking the ‘right’ enquiry questions, or achieving some kind of specific desired outcome from the enquiry process).

The tone and quality of our interactions with our class participants/meditators (either in groups or 1-2-1) convey the qualities of mind and heart that we hope to engender in them. These

interactions demonstrate through felt experience how participants can relate to their own experience and to themselves with more mindfulness/compassion/Insight etc.

Opening up the enquiry

- A teacher invites participants to engage in enquiry by asking open-ended, general questions like ‘What did you notice?’ or ‘What did you feel?’. Open-ended questions invite participants to explore for themselves what just happened for them, without requiring them to “know” the answer or evaluate the experience. Closed questions e.g. ‘Did you enjoy that practice?’ or ‘How was that for you?’ are more likely to close down the enquiry conversation. A closed question usually only requires a yes or no answer or is more evaluative of experience.
- You may want to first go around and simply hear a bit from each participant, and then go back to someone to go deeper. You could also have the participants start out in pairs, and then hear back from them in the larger group.
- During enquiry the teacher models friendly interest, curiosity, acceptance and kindness towards whatever is shared by participants.
- Sensitivity and respect for participants’ limits are also important, which can be demonstrated by reflecting back what you’ve heard, asking permission to enquire further and thanking participants for their responses.
- During the enquiry, although your main focus is on your participants, it is essential also to remain centred, grounded and mindful of your own feelings, sensations and thoughts, as you would when guiding a practice. Staying grounded in your own experience will support you to stay connected in an embodied way with your participants and listen deeply to how what they are sharing is affecting you. This effect can then inform the enquiry.
- Enquiry needs to focus both on the **content** of participants’ awareness (mindfulness) and the **quality** of that awareness (kindness and compassion).
- Sometimes it can be enough to simply reflect back what you’ve heard (e.g., “so there was a sense of relief?”), seen (“and then you visibly relaxed, like this...”) or the effect that what they’ve shared has had on you, (e.g., “When you said you felt a sense of relief, I could really get a sense of that too.”) Reflecting back is a powerful way to show someone you care, that they have been fully taken in by you, and that what they’ve said is important.
- It can be helpful to bear in mind the need to focus in on what the participant is experiencing *beneath the story* they may be telling about their experience, and on what they actually need right here and now in order to be with that experience (usually some combination of mindfulness, compassion and kindness). We can even ask them ‘What do you need right now?’
- If in doubt, and especially in the early stages of a meditation course, you can always bring participants back to becoming aware of their own direct experience

Elements of enquiry

A period of enquiry might include:

- Listening – transformative listening/listening with the whole self to what is said and not said, body language, tone, effect on you and others, etc.
- Focus on/paying full attention to the person enquired of
- Summarising and reflecting back
- Dialogue with the person enquired of
- An attitude of friendly interest/curiosity/compassion
- A willingness to stay with whatever arises
- Awareness of the body language of the person enquired of – and reflecting this back as appropriate
- Following the thread of experience and reflection of the person enquired of – not having a preformed agenda
- Allowing the enquiry to have its own “life” – to grow and change in a way that trusts what is emerging for the person being enquired of

Four kinds of listening

Listening is a key skill in enquiry. There are four potential levels of listening as an enquirer:

- **Distracted** – when we aren’t able to listen because of external (i.e., a loud noise) or internal (i.e., rehearsing what we are going to say in response) distractions.
- **Self-referential** – listening with a “me” filter, so that everything we hear we interpret from our own vantage point. For example, if someone shares an experience that sounds similar to ours. Rather than listening deeply for what is unique to that person’s experience and keeping the focus on them, we hear it through the lens of our own experience, and may therefore miss something important about what they are sharing.
- **Fix-it** – listening for problems that need to be solved, rather than keeping the focus on process and the breadth and complexity of experience, we listen only for problems and respond only with solutions. Fix-it listening leads to a closing down, solution-oriented listening, rather than an opening out, exploratory listening.
- **Transformative** – Engaged, deep listening from the heart, taking in what is being said (and *not* said), felt, and communicated through the body and energy of a person. This kind of listening allows for the unknown to reveal itself, for themes to be openly explored without needing to come to any resolution.

During enquiry, the role of the teacher is to be aware of these levels of listening within oneself, and as demonstrated through the responses of others, and to exemplify and support the group to keep the focus on a transformative level of listening. (We won’t always get it right, as enquiry is also a practice for us as teachers!)

As an enquirer, you can practise:

- Noticing and listening deeply to your own responses, sensations, feelings, thoughts
- Asking yourself how can you meet your own responses?

e.g. compassionate awareness towards one's own anxiety or need to 'fix', find answers or solutions etc

- Noticing how much can emerge in enquiry without us doing much, but simply listening fully, in being mode
- Connecting with the emotions that go with listening to another in this way eg. warmth, compassion, a sense of humility.
- Dropping the need for clarity (as the person being enquired into may not have clarity/be clear) and listening for meaning (what is actually going on and how can I help this person be with that experience more fully).

Some Possible Enquiry Questions

But beware of too much reliance on preformed questions! Practise being present to your participants' experience with kindness, being naturally yourself, in interested, listening mode. The main 'skill' is simply to listen with genuine interest and receptivity to the other person.

Opening the enquiry

- What did you notice during that practice?
- I wonder/am curious about what you noticed during that practice?
- What did you notice?
- What experiences did you notice during that practice?
- What sensations, thoughts or emotions did you notice during that practice?

Going deeper

- What was your experience of that?
- Where was that in your body?
- How did that feel in your body?
- What were the sensations there?
- Where did you notice that?
- Were you aware of that at the time?
- Did that change or stay the same?
- Was it pleasant or unpleasant?
- How did/do you know?
- What happened then/next?
- Did you notice...?

Bringing enquiry to a close

- Would you like to say anything more about that?

- What's here now?
- How does it feel now having shared that?

What enquiry is not

- *Discussion* - enquiry is not a discussion or exchange of ideas but an exploration of direct, moment-to-moment experience
- *Elaboration* - enquiry invites participants to distil and clarify direct experience - the opposite of telling stories about our experience.
- *Interpretation* - interpretation is about what our experience *means* whereas we are more concerned in enquiry with awareness of experience and how we relate to our experience.
- "Why?" - enquiry asks *what*, not *why*. We are not trying to analyse why we feel as we do.
- *Fixing* - most efforts to fix moment-to-moment experience, of ourselves and others, are a kind of resistance (usually to avoid discomfort), and are therefore unhelpful.
- *Therapy* – the purpose is to build resources and transform suffering, through the skills of mindfulness, compassion, Insight etc—rather than to gain greater understanding of why we are the way we are. Therapy is another skill that can of course be extremely useful and sometimes necessary; but this should be accessed from a skilled professional outside meditation enquiry.
- *Objective* – our experience is subjective, so no one has all the answers. The course participant is the expert on their own experience.
- *Doing* - enquiry is a way of *being* together, without trying to *achieve* any specific outcome.
- *A formula or set of rules* – rules of enquiry can easily get in the way of what is basically a natural human encounter.
- *Q & A* – we're not digging for answers in enquiry, but allowing things to unfold gently.

When to end enquiry

- With experience, a teacher develops a sense of when to stop a thread of enquiry with a participant, especially by paying attention to the body language of the participant and to their own inner knowing.
- Enquiry with one individual will not usually take more than about 5 minutes of group time – you might like to follow up after the session with the individual if it feels that more time is needed.
- Sometimes enquiry can be really effective when it is simply a word or two from the teacher to validate a participant's experience or realisation about their own inner ways of relating to their experience.
- It is important to pay attention to the vulnerability of the participant when they are sharing their experience. Are their body language and verbal responses communicating that they have gone far enough into this experience for now? If that's the case, trust that they can be encouraged to stay with their experience and digest it further in private after the class. On the other hand, the discomfort may be the teacher's rather than the participant's – perhaps we are suffering from a desire to fix/know what to say next in the face of our participant's difficulty or distress. In that case, we can practise turning with

kindness towards our own discomfort and continue to enquire into our participant's experience. Experience usually gives teachers a better sense of whether they are seeking to protect themselves or their participants from emotional discomfort.

- If you realise that you are talking a lot, it's probably time to be quiet and let the participant speak, or bring the enquiry to an end.
- It can be helpful at the end of an enquiry to broaden out and include the rest of the group. This can be kept brief, or help open up a new enquiry. You might ask, "Did anyone else have a similar/different experience?" or "What happen for you while you were listening?"

Most teachers find that they learn as much during enquiry as their course participants do. If approached with an attitude of humility and openness, enquiry becomes less of a 'difficult set of skills to be acquired' and more of a natural process of being present to another human being with an open heart, a sense of gentle curiosity and mindful awareness.

Important footnote: Enquiry is just one of many 'strings to the bow' of being an effective meditation teacher. You may choose to use it a lot in your teaching, or hardly at all. The main thing is to have some experience with it, so you can use it when/if it seems appropriate.