Quiet Mind, Meditative Mind and Emerging Wisdom:
A Transtheoretical Model of the Wisdom Process

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The concept of wisdom is increasingly being examined as a psychological construct (Sternberg, 1990; Sternber & 2005; Baltes & Staudinger, 2000); the discussion, while primarily informed by Western and intellectual perspectives of what is meant by this term, acknowledges certain core elements, primarily the ability to fruitfully engage conflicting knowledge or aspects of a situation or goal, as central to what is meant by wisdom. This paper will extend that discussion by positing that "wisdom" is an emergent process that occurs when habitual, generally self-protective reactions of the conditioned mind are suspended and transcended, allowing integration of more complex processing to occur. The paper will then examine the degree to which this process of emergence of wisdom can be cultivated through meditative and contemplative practices. This perspective on "wisdom" is informed both by Buddhist psychology and contemporary psychological principles. Furthermore, it is consistent with a transdiciplinary approach to knowledge and with the growing need to engage increasingly complex and disparate perspectives on understanding and problem solving.

Wise Thought, Wise Action

Although the term 'wisdom' is most often associated with more profound choices or intellectual discourse, a broader model of wise choice or action posits that wisdom may appear within any realm of functioning, from everyday activities (wise eating; wise friendship) to the transcendent (spiritual wisdom). In fact, looking at wise choice within more mundane tasks may help us to understand the emergence of wisdom within loftier arenas. How do I balance desire for ice cream versus health concerns? Creating rules ("I'll never eat ice cream again") may

seem a ‘wise’ decision, but it is far more challenging to leave oneself flexible to the complexity of the moment. It is in making an appropriate choice within that realm of complexity which may be a truer hallmark of wisdom. Therefore, it can be argued that there is no arena of human behavior or action which cannot be engaged ‘wisely’, rather than habitually or automatically.

Wisdom: Buddhist Psychology, Western Psychology

Wisdom, rather than coming from reading inspired books or listening to enlightened teachers, emerges as a result of experience, practice, and engaging particular types of knowing or understanding. Wisdom is a process of transformation that puts the practitioner in a psychological and spiritual position to experience reality clearly and calmly. This is in contrast to more typical processing, in which our minds focus more narrowly, whether within habitual patterns of daily activities, or within particular sets of concepts or experiences. Buddhist psychology and perspectives on the mind (Gethin, 1998; Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987; Kornfield, 2001) are particularly pertinent here, in linking traditional concepts of wisdom with contemporary understanding of the concept.

Western concepts of wisdom tend to focus more on the content than the process of coming to wise choice or action, but there are theories and models in contemporary psychology which can be drawn on, to move us away from the idea of wisdom as a set of concepts or expression of a particular philosophical-religious doctrine. In particular, work by Baltes, Staudinger, Sternberg and others emphasizes the emergent nature of wisdom from a psychological perspective. It is recognized that wisdom is a desired goal of development. Ardelt (2004; 2003) calls for more focus on individual differences in wisdom, with an importance on the capacity to balance cognitive, reflective and affective aspects of wisdom, which she associates with more Eastern approaches to understanding wisdom.

Relatively little work, however, has been done on ways to systematically cultivate wisdom. While there are undoubtedly various approaches that can be utilized, one of the most powerful may involve learning to engage enough inner silence or stillness to allow for the

suspension of everyday thought and the emergence of more complex perspectives. All cultures and traditions recognize and value contemplative thought, yet this may be under-recognized as a particularly powerful means for creating syncretistic perspectives. Whether for transciplinary or transcultural dialogue, one must actively suspend investment in more immediate, overlearned and comfortable ways of seeing or responding, and open the mind to alternatives. Meditation practice can be a powerful tool for cultivating this awareness and for cultivating the ability to be non-reactive. I will argue in this paper that wisdom, in relation both to everyday types of activities and to more profound choices and decisions, emerges from this still awareness.

The argument can also be made that “wise-mind” thinking may entail unique types of brain/mind patterns. The movie “What the [Bleep]?” graphically depicts the emergence of wisdom at the neurophysiological – and emotional level. In this movie, a young woman, a news reporter/photographer, is tortured by her memories and insecurities (she is deaf) following betrayal by her husband virtually on their wedding night. When assigned, against her wishes, to cover a wedding by her editor, she reacts with flashbacks and inappropriate behavior, including joining the party and ending on a one night stand with a guest. These reactions reflect automatic and fear driven behavior, that draw very little on her larger sense of self. However, out of this, she faces her anxieties and fears for the first time, and comes to the awareness that she can neither escape nor live her life with this betrayal defining her sense of self. The movie uniquely represents this transformation by depicting her brain cells literally realigning themselves from an overactive repetitive circuitry, returning to one of complexity, understanding, and I would posit, wisdom.

The fact that substantive changes in neural processing occur during the meditative process, including an increase in neural synchrony, is being increasingly documented. With extensive meditation practice, there appears to be an increasing integration of brain functioning (Lutz et al, 2004) across separate areas; not only does this foster a greater sense of well-being, but in traditional terms, leads to insight and awareness. There is also evidence that such an

increased sense of drawing on this "wise mind" can occur even with relatively limited practice. For example, in our research (Kristeller & Hallett, 1999; Kristeller, Baer, & Quillion-Wolever, 2006) on applying mindfulness meditation practice to issues such as making healthier food choices, participants in an 2-3 month program report not only finding themselves able to suspend compulsive eating patterns, but that alternatives come to mind increasingly easily and without being directly suggested. They then report being able to extend this quality of insight to other parts of their lives, including an enrichment of their spiritual well-being.

Conditioned Reactivity, Wisdom and the Contemplative Mind

Stillness involves suspending the mind's habitual patterns; insight refers to the more complex, creative, and "deeper" levels of processing and then understanding and discernment, that emerge as a result of the ensuing mindfulness practice. This type of "wisdom" can therefore occur within any domain of functioning and need not entail intellectual processing, as is often implied in Western concepts of wisdom, although Sternberg has also acknowledged the domain-specific aspect of wisdom (Sternberg & Spear-Swerling, 1998). Figure 1 illustrates how a meditative state disengages the usual path of reacting across all domains of functioning: attentional, physical, emotional, behavioral, relation to self/others, and spiritual. The spiritual domain, often associated with what we mean by 'wisdom', is often a challenge to engage in the context of everyday functioning; access to this domain of functioning appears to be particularly facilitated through meditative practice.

Figures 2a through 2e illustrate the process in relation to a given response. Under usual conditions, automatic reactions are stimulated by particular trigger situations, as illustrated in Fig. 2a. The mind/brain is designed to scan the content of one's environment continuously for information that is either threatening, potentially gratifying (or rewarding), or novel. Thousands of pieces of information per second are processed and responded to at a pre-conscious level, with the most salient and demanding moving (usually) into conscious levels of experience,

triggering highly conditioned reactions that are experienced as automatic. For example, for our compulsive over-eaters, the trigger may be a challenging interpersonal situation, followed by cravings for the comfort of ice cream. For cancer patients, it may be the terror of the threat of death. These reactions then cascade into other reactions, which may be experienced as out of our control, depending on the circumstances and the level of threat, gratification or novelty involved. This process, in itself, is absolutely normal and necessary to our usual functioning. Alternative responses, such as finding a friend to talk to about the difficult situation, may be available but are weaker in saliency. Fund of experience and knowledge is important in creating alternative responses in that these are not even possible if such experience or knowledge don't exist. Mindfulness meditation, by cultivating non-judgmental attention, first facilitates awareness of both the triggers and reactions, as illustrated in Figure 2b. As shown in Figure 2c, the meditative state appears to interrupt or disengage this usual pattern of reacting, facilitating a more balanced and reflective consideration of alternatives, as illustrated in Figure 2c (or 360 degree smrti, in Buddhist psychology terms); this then promotes less automatic responding. This level of responding leads to a more relaxed state, and less anxiety as ruminative thinking is decreased, along with a sense of better functioning. However, it is not necessarily indicative of 'wise mind'. In contemporary neuron-psychological terms, it is indicative of engaging executive functioning capacities of the pre-frontal cortex, and is associated with a sense of choice and more usual modes of decision-making.

For example, in the clinical arena in which I work, cognitive-behavioral approaches to treating eating disorders seek to 'de-condition' sets of physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive processes that have become dysfunctional through well-recognized means such as extinction, desensitization, exposure therapy, training concrete alternative responses, and changing the cognitive 'set' or framework. These approaches are widely used and are highly effective (and we all use variations of them in managing our daily lives) in decreasing symptoms and improving the likelihood of alternative behaviors, but rarely are they experienced as leading

to ‘wisdom’. For the seriously ill patient, there may a sense of increased inner peace, a realization of the value of friends and family, of the need to put affairs into order, but not necessarily the profound engagement with wisdom or transformation that comes to some, such as communicated in Mitch Albom’s book “Tuesdays with Morrie”.

Figure 2e illustrates the development of ‘wise mind’, which can emerge within or across domains of functioning. Primary, dominant conditioned reactions are not only suspended, but access to alternative responses is heightened. Yet the wise response is not necessarily engagement of one of these alternatives; it comes from the open access to multiple alternatives, such that true wisdom has an emergent quality to it. Often, while meditating, the result of this process is experienced as a sense of “knowing”—a sense of realizing a novel, yet true or wise perspective on a problem, or source of suffering, for oneself or others. The actual content or problem solved may or may not be profound, but the solution is experienced as balanced and unconflicted. It can be argued that this is because higher level integration of previously discrete, and even conflicting knowledge, is occurring. To the extent that insight into how to create balance or solve a problem involves disengagement from habitual patterns and seeing the problem in a larger perspective, it is in continuity with the Buddhist concepts of wisdom and spiritual growth (Kornfield, 2000). It is the ‘ah-ha’ experience of Zen or the experience of inner peace in face of trauma that emerges through contemplative practice.

Cultivating the Wise Mind

The use of mindfulness meditation appears to assist the individual in becoming aware of how the conditioned mind reacts and then, with purpose, disengage the reactive mind, producing a sense of stillness and clear awareness. Into the space of quiet, emerges the wisdom of the mind that is carried within. Our constructed meanings and habitual patterns associated with eating are a natural target for such meditative interventions, and our work on this is one example of emergent wisdom; however, the processes involved can be applied to virtually any domain of knowledge and experience. For the wise mind, meaning is not imposed

from without; rather wisdom can be found within, once the nature of the mind is simply observed, rather than reacted to, and once these patterns of reaction are disengaged. This is clearly consistent with the idea of an inherent wisdom found in many schools of Buddhism (Williams, 1989; Gethin, 1998). What is being taught in meditation practice are ways of looking for and listening to that wisdom that are accessible at some level to all individuals.

In order to perceive reality without the clouding effects of compulsive desire or fearful avoidance, both of which interrupt wise choice, the individual must be able to be aware of how the conditioned mind reacts and then, with purpose, disengage the reactive mind, producing a sense of stillness and clear awareness. Meditation practice is a powerful tool for cultivating this awareness and the ability to be non-reactive. In our experience, wisdom, as we understand it, emerges from this still awareness. Therefore, stilling the mind allows the emergence of right action and right thought, resulting in balance rather than imbalance and distress, not only within what is considered spiritual experience, transcendence or enlightenment, but across all domains of one's experience. While effects may not be as pervasive and profound for beginning meditators as are those of more experienced practitioners, they are often strikingly powerful as is illustrated in systematic use of such practices in therapeutic contexts.

A multi-domain model of meditation also fits well with the concept of a wide-ranging development of wisdom. If wisdom is understood as a process of discovering perspective and balance, rather than as a set of philosophical constructs, or as simply an intellectual attainment of a higher understanding, then it becomes possible to wisely and mindfully engage all domains of functioning (cognitive reasoning, emotions, behavior, relation to others, relation to self, spirituality) wisely – or unwisely. Wisdom is primarily a process, not a set of external concepts or rational perspectives. It involves, among other elements, the capacity to see clearly, face reality, and make more balanced decisions. Buddhist thought suggests that as one clears away compulsive patterns of thinking and acting, wiser decisions are made. Our mindfulness-based treatment for obesity and overeating illustrates this process. Rather than admonishing or

challenging compulsive eaters to change their behavior or giving them specific diets to follow, we give them the tools to observe the self more gently, and more fully, particularly in regard to those situations that trigger 'mindless' eating or that override natural signals to stop eating. The results of this treatment program are evidence for the notion of an inherent wisdom that emerges when compulsive thoughts or urges are mindfully observed, rather than being engaged with or reacted to.

Mindfulness meditation facilitates this wiser engagement with our psychological life by training us to approach our experiences and challenges within each of these domains from a more disengaged position, stilling the mind so a deeper and more balanced perspective can emerge. Mindfulness meditation is far more than a technique for achieving relaxation or countering stress; it can most substantially be considered a means to a deeper exploration of the mind and to discovering inherent wisdom.

Illustrations: Wise Eating

In our work with compulsive overeaters, they all acknowledge serious problems with mindless eating, eating in response to emotional triggers, rather than to physical hunger and satiety cues, and multiple efforts with typical dieting, sometimes quite successfully but rarely with enduring effect. Typical diets impose external rules for eating, whether quite rigidly as in totally avoiding certain foods or more flexibly as in the 'point counting' of Weight Watchers. However, these rules rarely can be followed indefinitely, and quickly become burdensome.

In our Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT) (Kristeller & Hallett, 1999; Kristeller, Wolever, & Baer, 2006) we build on a foundation of practice in mindfulness meditation, adding to general meditation practice training in eating meditations, mindful awareness of hunger and satiety cues, mindful awareness of eating triggers, and other related meditations, such as a forgiveness meditation to handle experiences of anger, whether at oneself or others. We begin, in group sessions, with mindfully eating a raisin, and move to mindfully eating more and more challenging foods, including chocolate, chips, and a buffet

meal. We repeatedly encourage participants to engage their 'wise mind' in making choices about when to eat, what to choose, and how much to eat, but avoid providing specific external guidelines. By using mindful eating and meditation practice, participants in our program quickly find that they can not only identify their own hunger and satiety experiences, but make wiser choices about foods to eat, not only in regard to quantity but also quality. Relative to participants enrolled in a more standard intervention group, they improve more in their ability to manage hunger experiences, and a variety of triggers for eating. They also improve more in their emotional regulation, and amount of weight loss is directly related to amount of overall meditation practice. The experience also begins to generalize to other areas of life; one participant stated that "I use it with everything. I mean, when I get upset at work I just go in the bathroom and do a mini meditation. Sometimes I count to 10 or I just breathe and I don't binge anymore, at all. I mean, I don't really diet but I don't binge at all. And like tonight, …. my husband spilled tea in my car, usually I would get mad and lash out at him and start screaming at him, but nothing bothers me anymore. "

Questions Raised

The model of emergent wisdom proposed raises further questions: How is 'wisdom' best defined? Is 'wisdom' a discontinuous, qualitatively distinct emergent process, or is it on a continuum, with dysfunctional processing of information at one end, usual means of processing in the middle, and wisdom at the other? Are there universal means of cultivating 'wise mind'? To what degree does 'wisdom' transfer across domains of functioning? Are meditative or contemplative practices uniquely suited to developing such capacities? Are particular types of meditative practices more effective? Does the process of 'wisdom' entail unique neuro-physiological processes? What is the relationship of 'wise' mind to spiritual experience? Are these inherently interlinked processes – or is spirituality simply another domain within which wise mind can be applied? These questions will form the basis for the discussion part of the presentation.

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Figure 1

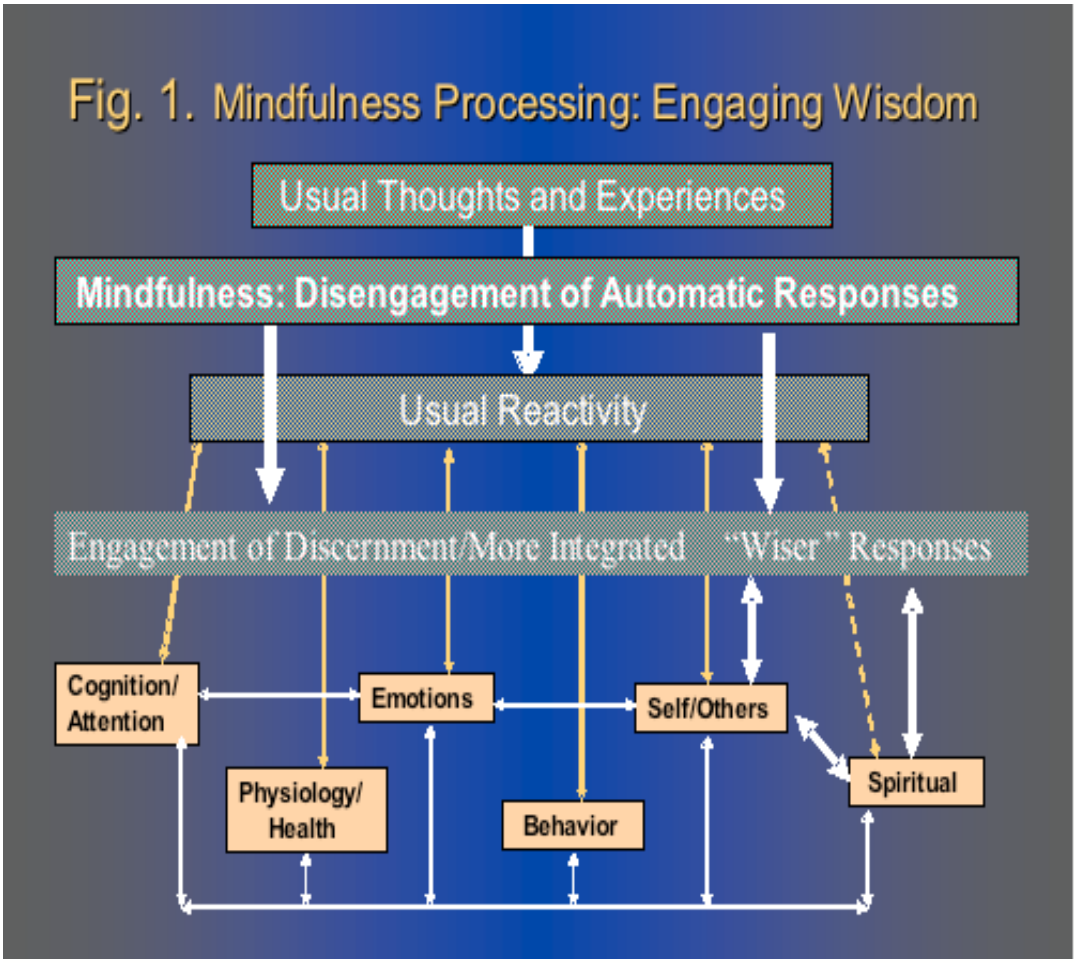
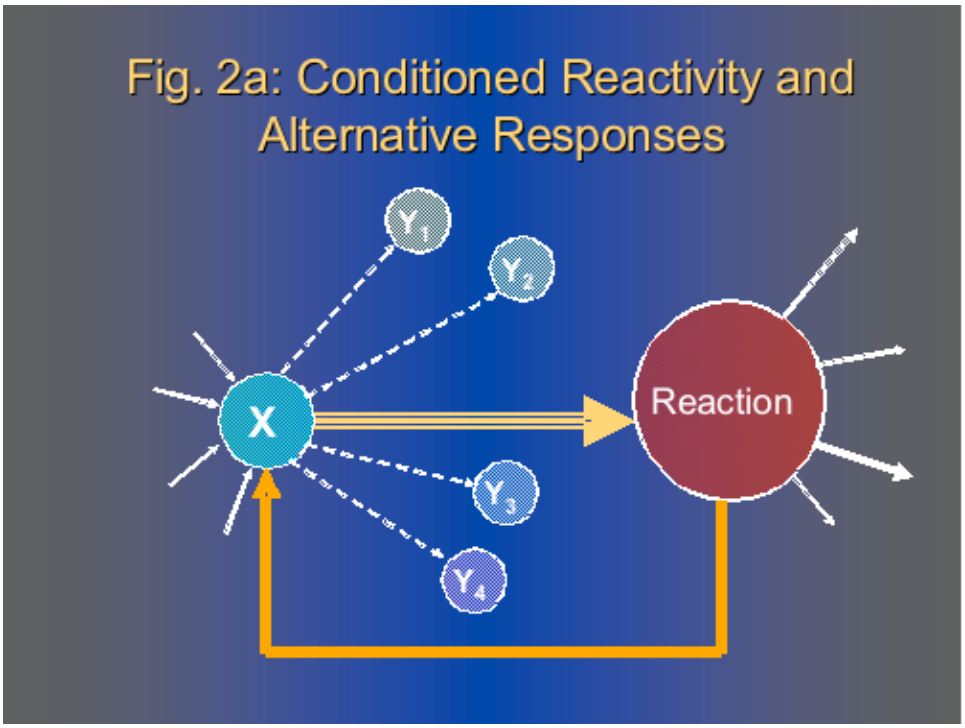
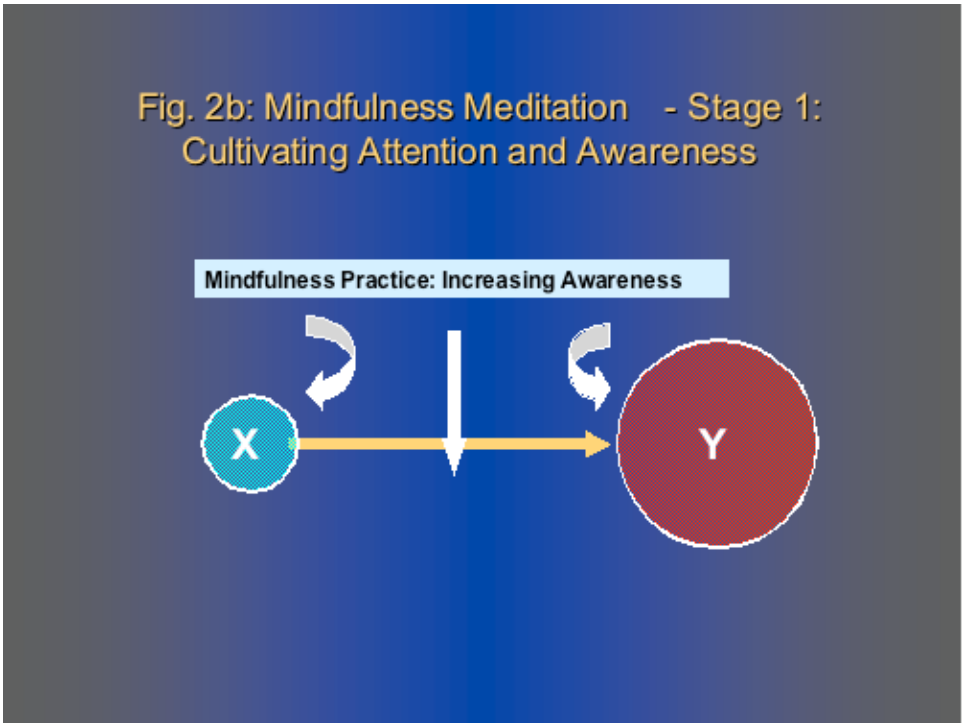


Fig. 1. Mindfulness Processing: Engaging Wisdom
Usual Thoughts and Experiences
Mindfulness: Disengagement of Automatic Responses
Usual Reactivity
Engagement of Discernment/More Integrated "Wiser" Responses
Cognition/ Attention
Emotions
Self/Others
Spiritual
Physiology/ Health
Behavior

Figure 2: Conditioned Reactivity and Alternative Wise Response





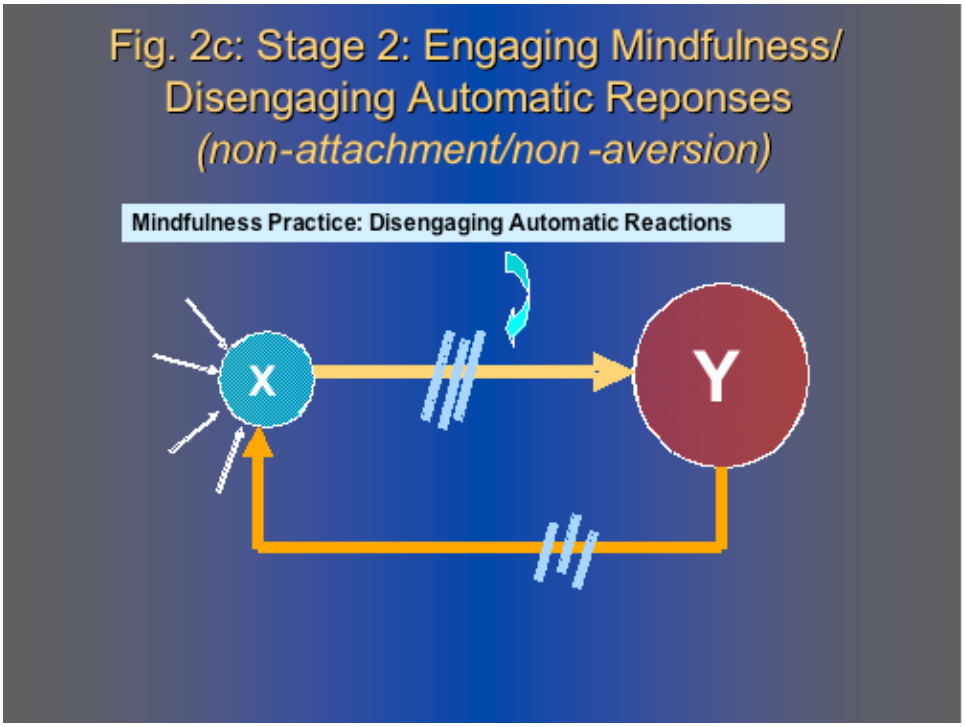


Fig. 2c: Stage 2: Engaging Mindfulness/
Disengaging Automatic Reponses
(non-attachment/non -aversion)
Mindfulness Practice: Disengaging Automatic Reactions
X
Y

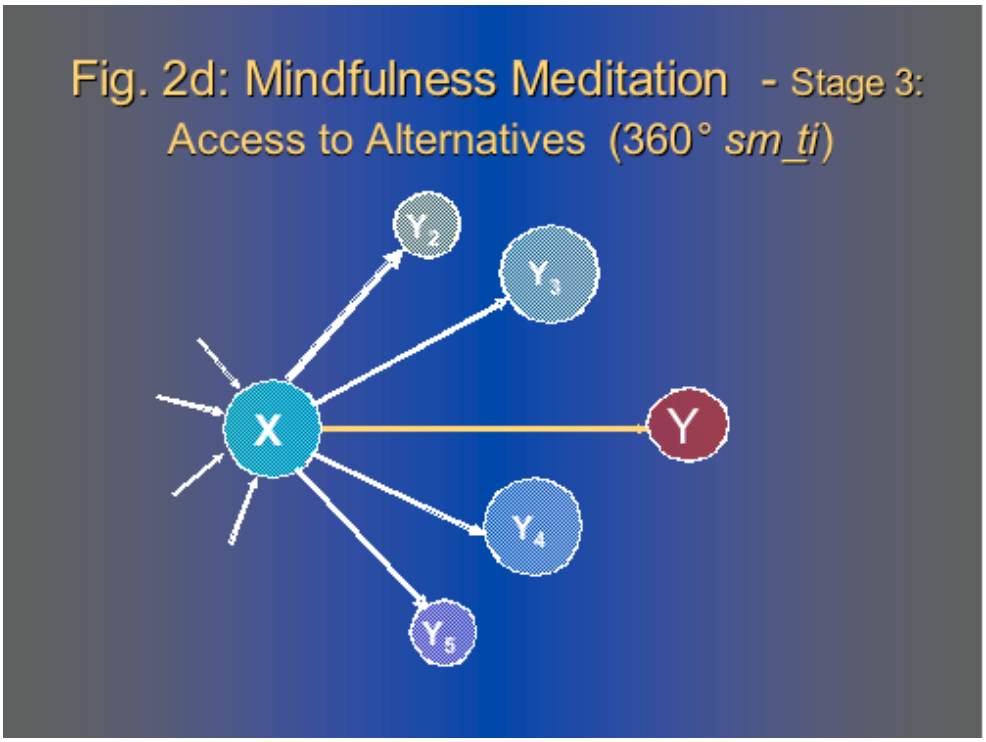


Fig. 2d: Mindfulness Meditation - Stage 3:
Access to Alternatives (360° sm_ti)
Y2
Y3
X
Y
Y4
Y5

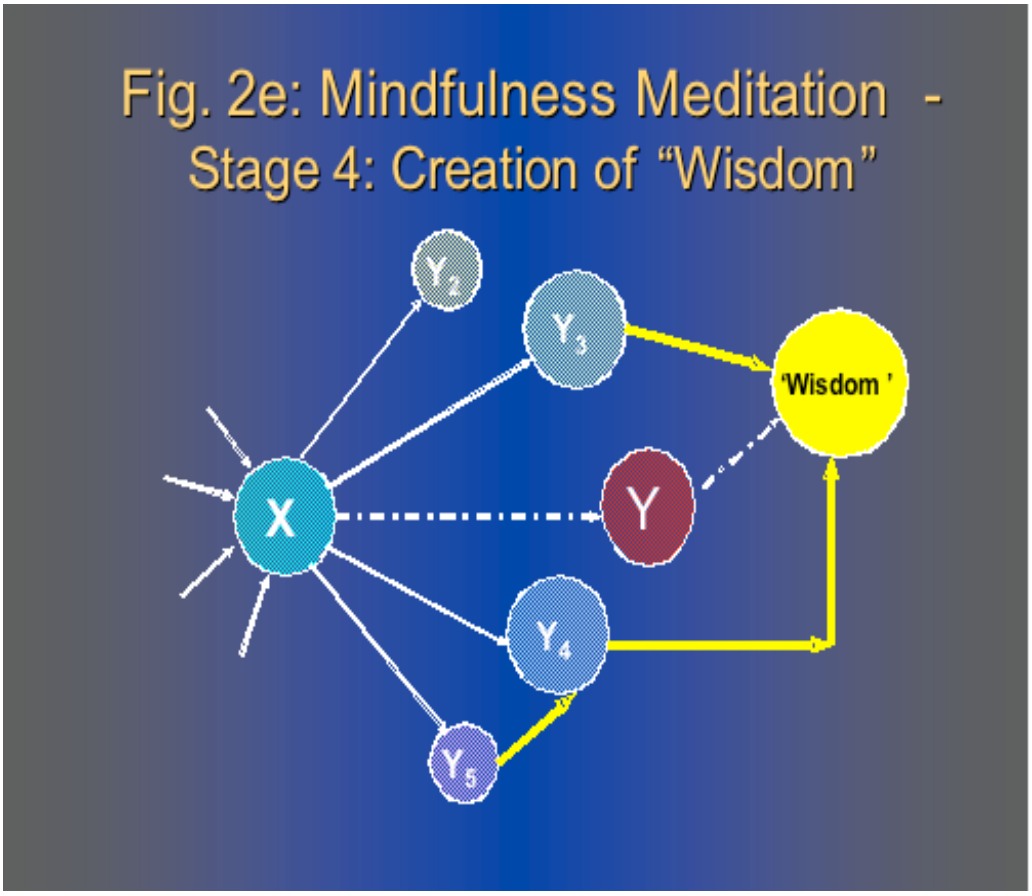


Fig. 2e: Mindfulness Meditation -
Stage 4: Creation of "Wisdom"
Y2
Y3
'Wisdom '
X
Y
Y4
Y5