



Taking True Refuge

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Talk I Introduction

Robert Hodge 10/21/2020

*They go to many a refuge,
to mountains, forests,
parks, trees, and shrines:
people threatened with danger.
That's not the secure refuge,
that's not the highest refuge,
that's not the refuge,
having gone to which,
you gain release
from all suffering and stress.*

*But when, having gone for refuge
to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha,
you see with right discernment
the four Noble Truths —
stress,
the cause of stress,
the transcending of stress,
and the Noble Eightfold Path,
the way to the stilling of stress:
That's the secure refuge,
that, the highest refuge,
that is the refuge,
having gone to which,
you gain release
from all suffering and stress.
— Dhammapada, 188-192*

This series is about how we can find freedom from stress by taking the true refuge. As noted above, the Buddha described three gateways to this refuge which are traditionally known as the Three Jewels or Gems. We enter each of these gateways (in any order) to find that refuge, that place of peace and safety.

The inspiration for this series comes from True Refuge by Tara Brach¹. We will explore other resources including the Buddha's teachings (suttas).

What is refuge?

A refuge is defined as a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble. Tara notes that when we suffer, we may seek false refuges: "They are false because while they may provide a temporary sense of comfort or security, they create more suffering in the long run. We might have a fear of failure and take refuge in staying busy, in striving to perform well, or in taking care of others. Or

we might feel unlovable and take refuge in pursuing wealth or success. Maybe we fear being criticized and take refuge in avoiding risks and always pleasing others. Or we feel anxious or empty and take refuge in alcohol, overeating, or surfing the Web. Instead of consenting and opening to what we are actually feeling, our turn toward false refuges is a way of avoiding emotional pain. But this only takes us further from real comfort, further from home.”²

This series is about finding and taking true refuge. Tara notes: “The great gift of a spiritual path is coming to trust that you can find a way to true refuge. You realize that you can start right where you are, in the midst of your life, and find peace in any circumstance. Even at those moments when the ground shakes terribly beneath you—when there’s a loss that will alter your life forever—you can still trust that you will find your way home. This is possible because you’ve touched the timeless love and awareness that are intrinsic to who you are.

Looking back through history, and across many religious and spiritual traditions, we can recognize three archetypal gateways that appear again and again on the universal path of awakening. For me, the words that best capture the spirit of these gateways are “truth,” “love,” and “awareness.” Truth is the living reality that is revealed in the present moment; love is the felt sense of connectedness or oneness with all life; and awareness is the silent wakefulness behind all experience, the consciousness that is reading these words, listening to sounds, perceiving sensations and feelings. Each of these gateways is a fundamental part of who we are; each is a refuge because it is always here, embedded in our own being. If you’re familiar with the Buddhist path, you may recognize these gateways as they appear in their traditional order: Refuge in the Buddha (an “awakened one” or our own pure awareness) Refuge in the dharma (the truth of the present moment; the teachings; the way) Refuge in the sangha (the community of spiritual friends or love)³

In the Vera Sutta, the Buddha describes the Buddha, Dharma, and the Sangha: ‘Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in clear-knowing & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the cosmos, unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed, teacher of devas & human beings, awakened, blessed.’

‘The Dhamma is well taught by the Blessed One, to be seen here & now, timeless, inviting verification, pertinent, to be experienced by the observant for themselves.’

‘The Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples who have practiced well... who have practiced straight-forwardly... who have practiced methodically...who have practiced masterfully—...they are the Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples: deserving of gifts, deserving of hospitality, deserving of offerings, deserving of respect, the incomparable field of merit for the world.’⁴

As noted above, Tara describes the gateways as Truth, Love, and Awareness. This corresponds to the traditional Buddhist tradition of the Dharma (Truth), the Sangha (Love) and Buddha (Awareness). The three gateways are also related to three divisions of the Eightfold Path: Wisdom (Truth), Conduct (Love), and Practice (Awareness). These relationships are shown below.

Brach	Traditional Buddhism	Eightfold Path
Truth	Dharma	Wisdom
Love	Sangha	Conduct
Awareness	Buddha	Practice

For the purposes of this series, we will be using Tara’s naming.

One more aspect of the gateways: Tara notes: “How can we enter these gateways in our everyday lives? If you look again, you’ll see that each domain of refuge has both an outer and an inner aspect. The outer expressions of the refuges are the sources of healing, support, and inspiration that we find in the world around us. We can learn from wise teachings (truth). We can be nourished by the warmth of good friends and family (love). We can be uplifted by the example of spiritual leaders (awareness). Every religion and spiritual path offer these outer refuges. If we are willing to engage with them, they can offer us immediate, concrete help in living our daily lives. Yet each outer refuge also offers something more: It is a portal to the inner refuges of pure awareness, the living flow of truth and boundless love. As we inhabit these expressions of our true nature, the trance of separation dissolves and we are free.⁵

What does it mean to take refuge?

As Tara described, there are three areas of refuge: truth, love, and awareness. We can choose our gateway depending on what relief our suffering calls for. It’s like entering a large room with three smaller conference areas labelled truth, love, and awareness. We can enter truth to find wisdom and understanding about the workings of the body and mind. We can enter love to address fear and anger and learn how to care for ourselves and others through compassion. We can enter awareness to seek the support of the Buddha and other benefactors to strengthen our practice of mindfulness and meditation.

Outline of the Series

Below is a list of the talks

Introduction – Bob Hodge

RAINS - John Schorling

The Gateway of Truth

- Awakening to the Life of the Body - Laura Good
- Compulsive thinking is Not the truth - Laura
- Core beliefs that are Real but not the Truth - John

The Gateway of Love

Heart Medicine for Traumatic Fear - John

Seeing Beyond our Faults through Self-compassion -Bob

Love, Anger and Forgiveness - Laura

Compassion for all - John

Losing What We Love: the Pain of Loss - Laura

The Gateway of Awareness

Trusting Who We Are (Parts 1-3) Bob

Summary Reflections— John, Laura, Bob

As we explore the true refuge, it is important to commit to a daily meditation practice for about 30 minutes each day. Below is one approach.

1. **Position:** Sit up straight, feet parallel on the ground, eyes closed (can remain open but not forced, angled downward).
2. **Establish compassion:** – make a deep wish – “May I do this practice to benefit myself and others”
3. **Be Aware of your body** – note the contact on the chair, etc., shift focus to the hands and the contact of the hand with clothing, abdomen pressure of your waist.
4. **Deep Breaths:** Take 3 slow deep breaths and then just focus on how the breath enters and leaves your nose. Observe the sensation. Don’t push the air, just let it be. Do this for a period of time. If a thought, memory, or sensation arises, just note it and go back to observing the breath.
5. **Gratitude:** Bring to mind three things in your life for which you feel grateful. They can be things, people, situations—anything. Slowly think of them one at a time, exploring why you are—or could be—grateful for them. Feel the fullest sense of appreciation and gratitude for those things. (you can substitute a loving-kindness practice intermittently)
6. **Awareness:** Just be, observing what arises in the mind. Like the clouds in the sky, let the thoughts arise and fall away, noting their impermanence. Return to the breath if needed for calm.
7. **Establish compassion again:** “May this practice serve to benefit myself and others”

Talk II TRUTH: RAINS

John Schorling 10/28/2020

RAINS, which is the first chapter in the section of *True Refuge* titled “The Gateway of Truth”, is a way of investigating the truth of the way things are, and getting out of the trance of thinking. We spend most of our time engaged in cognitive activity, and often believe that we can think our way out of inner turmoil. Yet our reactions to our circumstances and situations arise from below conscious awareness and thus just thinking them is often futile, and hence a trance. In order to untangle this process, we must drop below it, into our present moment experience, into what Tara calls presence. RAINS is a very powerful process for doing this, and can be a path to insight. Much of mindfulness practice can be distilled to concentration and insight. Concentration practice helps stabilize the attention, and once we are able to do this, then we can really begin to pay attention to our present moment experience which can lead to insight. A regular meditation practice is essential to doing this.

Whenever a difficult emotion arises, we can transform our relationship to it by practicing with RAINS, a tool founded on mindfulness and compassion. For this series, we are using RAINS, **Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Non-identification and Self-compassion**, rather than RAIN. If you have read both *True Refuge* and *Radical Compassion*, you know that in the former, N stands for Non-identification and kindness is included as part of Investigation. In *Radical Compassion*, N stands for Nurture. We think both are important, and so we will be using the acronym RAINS to include both rather than RAIN with one or the other.

In formal mindfulness practice we keep our attention on the breath, unless some other experience is so strong that it pulls us away from our anchor. Then we can choose to turn our attention to that other experience. One kind of experience that can pull us away is strong physical sensation; another is strong emotion, which, like physical sensation, can simply arise spontaneously. We may also find we are lost in recurrent thoughts going over and over the same thing, ruminating. As Tara states in *True Refuge* “Recognition is seeing what’s true in your inner life. It starts the minute you focus your attention on whatever thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations are arising right here and now. ... Some parts of your experience are easier to connect with than others.”⁶

Perhaps we aren’t even aware of an emotion associated with the thinking. I work with many healthcare providers who often work long hours with few breaks and have to learn to suppress physical sensations and emotions just to get through the day. When I ask them to identify how they are feeling, often they can’t say. As a result, I use a cheat sheet with a list of emotions that I give to people to help them identify emotions. If you have difficulty identifying emotions, know that many others do too. It’s something that can take practice to learn.

In order to understand and process emotions, we need to let them exist as they arise and not get stuck in additional complications of judgment, evaluation, preferences, aversion, desires, clinging, resistance or other reactions. RAINS is not an easy practice because our inclination is to resist or avoid difficult emotions or to get lost in them. RAINS asks us to lean into the emotions mindfully and kindly. As we practice with it, it becomes easier. You won’t have to laboriously think of each letter in the acronym; they become more or less automatic.

Practicing with RAINS promotes greater clarity and calmness in the midst of difficulty, which in turn enables us to respond in wiser and kinder ways that can bring greater joy into our lives.

The five components of RAINS are:

R—Recognize your present moment experience

“You can awaken recognition by simply asking yourself, what is going on inside me right now?”⁷ It can be helpful to bring a sense of curiosity to doing this. You can try naming whatever you notice: this is (fear, anger, etc.). Don’t try to avoid or ignore. Often, we judge a difficult emotion as cowardly and try to bear up under it with a stiff upper lip. Or we’re so resistant that we don’t look at all; we change the subject.

A—Allow the difficult emotion to be present without judgment

Allow whatever arises to just be, including letting emotion(s) be present, knowing that in mindfulness practice any emotion is OK. To the degree possible, allowing includes meeting the emotion with an attitude of kindness, friendliness, interest, curiosity. Our resolve to “allow” an emotion can be supported with phrases whispered in the mind, “it’s like this,” “yes,” “this too.”

I—Investigate

Sometimes the first two steps are enough to reconnect us with presence. At other times, the attention gets carried away over and over again. If so, we can lean into the difficult emotion, noticing if we’re catastrophizing, building a negative story based on “what ifs,” things that haven’t happened and may not; drop the storying and mindfully return to the present moment. If we can mindfully return to the present, there is nothing more to do. But if the difficult emotion persists, we can take the attention into the body and notice the physical sensations that have been triggered by the emotion. We might even put our hand on the spot.

We might also ask ourselves simple questions. Tara suggests “How am I experiencing this in the body?”, “What is happening inside me?”, “What most wants attention?”, and “What am I believing?” In asking the latter question, it’s important to notice the tendency to get lost in thinking, to start a story about the beliefs. Rather, stay with whatever first arises, such as “I’m believing I’m not good enough,” noticing your experience in just being with this.

N—Non-identification

This is a key factor in this process, and in this path. In Buddhism, non-self is one of the three marks of existence, (anatta). The other two are suffering (dukkha) and impermanence (anicca). Non-self refers to the absence of a distinct separate solid self; that is, we are all the product of multiple causes and conditions, which are constantly changing. From a physiologic point of view, this is demonstrably true. Most cells in our bodies turn over in a matter of days to months. Even neurons in our brains which are long-lived are constantly rewiring. As a result, we are not our bodies, we are not our thoughts, and we are not our difficult emotions.

To practice non-identification, we can take a step back, remembering that the thoughts, sensations and emotions that are present don’t define us. Each of us is more and other than them. We can view whatever is arising as the (fear, anger, anxiety, etc.), not my (fear, anger, anxiety, etc). It is the emotion,

not my emotion; the thought, not my thought. You might also respond by saying “not me” or “not mine” to whatever is arising. This can be empowering.

S—Self-compassion

Self-compassion can permeate all of RAINS or be cultivated separately. Responding to yourself as you would a dear friend with warmth and caring – perhaps with a hand on the heart, you might say one of these phrases to yourself, “This is a moment of suffering; may I be kind to myself; may I give myself the care I need; may I hold myself with tenderness.”

RAINS can be used any time when an emotion becomes prominent, during formal mindfulness practice or in any moment of one’s daily life when strong emotions are present. If something has been bothering us, we might have the intention of paying attention to it during formal meditation, what we refer to as “sitting with it”. At other times, we may have the intention of paying attention to the breath while meditating, and we notice that a strong emotion is arising, or there is some sense of dis-ease in the body. If that is the case, we might make this the object of our meditation using RAINS.

So, let’s explore this using **RAINS** as the focus of a meditation.

Finding a comfortable position, eyes open or closed as you prefer. Bringing attention to the body, noticing the weight of the body sitting, having some sense of being grounded, of being connected with the earth. Let your attention settle in on your anchor, whether it is sound, the breath or other bodily sensations.

Now let the anchor recede into the background and bring to mind a recurrent situation when you know you will have a strong reaction. Notice the details of this episode. What thoughts arise? Bringing attention to the feelings, what is the predominate emotion?

Recognize what is happening inside you. If there is a predominant emotion, is it possible to name it? “this is anger” or “this is disappointment”. It may not be obvious what the emotion is, and if so that’s fine.

Just **Allow** your experience to be, without judging it or needing to fix it or make it go away. If this is too difficult, then directing the attention elsewhere is fine, back to the breath or perhaps to the feet or hands. You might try saying “yes” or “just let this be” to yourself.

If you are able to be with the emotion, then **Investigate** it, noticing where you feel it in the body, and the characteristics of the associated sensations.

You can also choose to investigate further the source of this feeling, asking yourself “How am I experiencing this in the body?” Notice the physical sensations that are arising. You might also ask “What most wants attention?”, and “What am I believing?”

Whatever is arising, see if it’s possible to just be with it without judging as it is a result of multiple causes and conditions, so not **Not identifying** with it, the N of RAINS. It does not define you – you are more and other than this. It may be useful to acknowledge this by saying to yourself “not me” or “not mine”.

Being with difficult emotions is hard, and practicing **Self-kindness and self-compassion** can be very helpful. You might do this by responding to yourself as you would to a friend, with warmth and caring, and by answering the question “what do I most need now?”

Often there is a tendency to close down around difficult emotions, so it can be helpful to visualize them held in a larger space. Awareness is vast, so visualizing holding these beliefs and emotions in a larger space can be helpful, even bigger than the physical self. You can also envision how your wisest self would respond, or you can imagine how a spiritual figure would respond to your suffering.

Just sit with this now, holding whatever is arising with spaciousness, compassion, and kindness.

When you are ready, letting go any images being held in the mind and returning the attention to breathing, or wherever else you might choose as an anchor. Resting the attention there and just breathing, and then opening the eyes once again if they have been closed.

Take a few moments now to notice the quality of presence. Whatever arises is ok.

RAINS can be practiced as a formal meditation as we just did. It can also be used in the moment. Tara calls this “taking a U turn” from an outward focus to what’s happening right now. A briefer version for doing this is:

- Recognize what is happening
- Allow your experience to be just as it is, perhaps taking a few deep breaths
- Investigate inner experience (thoughts, sensations, feelings) with kindness
- Now proceed with awareness

An example of this for me is traveling. I found I was often triggered by experiences of feeling I was not listened to or respected by airline agents or flight attendants, thinking how they “should” respond to me. So I practiced recognizing when this happened, noticing how I was feeling. And I would just allow this to be, without reacting. Then I investigated, noticing where I felt it in my body, usually as a tightness in my chest, and I asked what I was believing. The answer was that I perceived a lack of respect, so I asked why did I feel this, and underneath found a feeling of insecurity, of not being heard. Noticing this, I did not identify with it as defining me, but rather as a transient state that would pass, and I was able to respond with kindness, an acknowledgment that this was not pleasant. In doing this repeatedly, I found myself much less likely to get triggered in these situations.

Both chapters on RAIN in *True Refuge* and *Radical Compassion* start with the same quote that is often attributed to Viktor Frankl. He was an Austrian Jewish psychiatrist who survived being in a concentration camp in WWII:

“Between the stimulus and the response there is a space and in that space lies our power and our freedom.”⁸

RAINS is a way of exploring this space between stimulus and response, of learning to respond and not just react.

Talk III TRUTH: Awakening to The Life of The Body

Laura Good 11/4/2020

From *The Way of the Bodhisattva* by Shantideva, an 8th-century CE Indian philosopher, Buddhist monk, poet and scholar at the University at Nalanda.

*What we call the body is not feet or shins,
The body, likewise, is not thighs or loins.
It's not the belly nor indeed the back,
And from the chest and arms the body is not formed.
The body is not ribs or hands, Armpits, shoulders, bowels, or entrails;
It is not the head or throat:
From none of these is "body" constituted.
If "body," step by step,
Pervades and spreads itself throughout its members, Its parts indeed are present in the parts,
But where does the "body," in itself, abide!
If "body," single and entire,
Is present in the hand and other members,
However many parts there are, the hand and all the rest, You'll find an equal quantity of "bodies."
If "body" is not outside or within its parts, How is it, then, residing in its members? And since it has no
basis other than its parts, How can it be said to be at all?
Thus there is no "body" in the limbs,
But from illusion does the idea spring,
To be affixed to a specific shape—
Just as when a scarecrow is mistaken for a man.
As long as the conditions are assembled, A body will appear and seem to be a man. As long as all the
parts are likewise present, It's there that we will see a body.
Likewise, since it is a group of fingers, The hand itself is not a single entity.
And so it is with fingers, made of joints— And joints themselves consist of many parts.
These parts themselves will break down into atoms, And atoms will divide according to direction.
These fragments, too, will also fall to nothing.
Thus atoms are like empty space—
they have no real existence.
All form, therefore, is like a dream,
And who will be attached to it, who thus investigates! The body, in this way, has no existence⁹*

Tonight, we are going to talk about the body and how we can use it to open to a deeper understanding of reality and how it can bring us freedom.

In the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha says, "This body is not mine or anyone else's. It has arisen due to past causes and conditions."

As John talked about last week, just as our mind is rarely static, neither is our body. We are made up of trillions of cells that are continually dying and being reborn all at different rates. We really are never the

same person moment to moment. And this ever-changing biological organism that we call ourselves, is subject to the laws of nature on this planet – we are born, we are subject to illness, pain and death. Or as Wes Nisker says “this body is not ours; it is evolution’s body. The body we live in is a loaner.”¹⁰ Or rather our cells are doing a dance, a complicated, choreographed dance.

But it is what we have. Our body is the house for our brain and what we call our mind. Though our mind is how we think we are processing all the events of life, like it or not it is our body that feels what’s going on. It’s our body that is continually sensing and messaging our brain through our six sense doors (ears, eyes, nose, tongue, body, mind), then the mind reacts.

Our brain may tell us whether what we are experiencing is pleasure or pain or neither, but it is just the interpreter. What our body is sensing is plain physics, just as Shantideva was saying in the meditation. Atoms are buzzing all around, an object touches our skin, we don’t stop at sensing “feeling”-- we need know – friend or foe, for our own survival. Our perception kicks in and we are now subject to a mini story, based on past experience, about how we feel in regards to that sensation. And if we perceive this feeling as negative, we suffer. And when we suffer, we tend to want to push it away and make it stop. But in Buddhism, even positive feelings can cause suffering. Maybe you are working on your feet all day and you think, “I so look forward to getting home and just lying down, But if you lie down for too long, it gets uncomfortable”. We get pleasure at first from sitting down and then after a while too much sitting! Too many zoom meetings! Now I just want to stand up and so on.

So our craving, *tanha* (Pail word referring to "thirst, desire, longing, greed", either physical or mental) causes us to want the pleasure to last and pain to go away that is arising from *vedana*, sensation of the body. The Buddha truly was a scientist. Everything that arises in the mind arises with the sensations on the body and these sensations are the material we have to work with.

So how do we work with the body so we may experience freedom?

The Buddha gave us the instructions. Vipassana practice is based on the Mahasatipatthana Sutta (The Four Foundations of Mindfulness).¹¹ More than 2,600 years ago, the Buddha exhorted his senior *bhikkhus*, monks with the responsibility of passing his teachings on to others, to train their students in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of the body, the feelings, the mind and the dharma. “And how does a monk remain focused on the body in and of itself?

“There is the case where a monk—having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building—sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and setting mindfulness to the fore (front of chest). Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

“Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body’; he trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’ It goes on to the specific parts of the body.

“And further, when walking, the monk discerns, ‘I am walking.’ When standing, he discerns, ‘I am standing.’ When sitting, he discerns, ‘I am sitting.’ When lying down, he discerns, ‘I am lying down.’ Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it.

“In this way he remains focused internally on the body in and of itself, or externally on the body in and of itself, or both internally and externally on the body in and of itself. he remains independent, unsustained by [not clinging to] anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself.

It sounds simple, but until we actively focus on the body, do we really pay attention day to day? Only when it hurts, or when we feel good and energetic. Whatever we are paying attention or not, the body is.

Even though our mind may be wandering, somewhere in the body we are tensing or, slightly rigid in the breath. If we can focus on the sensations in the body without reacting, we can soften. The softening can feel like a release, which can be scary as well as the sensations can get more intense at first. This is where the freedom lies when we do not push away the experience.

But we have RAINS to help us. Note: If you are aware or sense your bodily sensations are caused by trauma, it is wise to work with a trained therapist.

But let’s try something here and now. I’m sure we all have had a range of bodily sensations related to not knowing. For example, our recent experience with the election

Recognize. What’s going on right now? If at first, you say a feeling (I’m afraid of the future, I am angry more people didn’t vote, I am suffering!),

Allow take a few breaths and simply drop your awareness to your feet or hands. Forget about the names of your feelings, just be aware of sensations. Do you feel the pressure of the floor? Are your hands involuntarily clenching? Keep breathing as if the breath was coming up from the ground, through your feet, through your body, out your hands and top of your head. Does the rhythm of your breath change as it goes across different body parts?

Investigate. If something is tight, what does the tightness feel like? Is it hot, is it prickly? If thoughts like “anxious” or “happy” “sad” “disgust” or “hate” come up keep, just softly ignore them and keep dipping down into the sensation. It’s all ok, you are safe, you are just recognizing, that’s all. With our breath we can simply acknowledge without judgement. Maybe it feels good -to say “I hate this” and if so, what does “I hate this” feel like in your body? Drop the story and just feel the feeling. Hot, prickly, does it affect the breath?

Non-identify. Whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, gross or subtle, every sensation shares the same characteristic: it arises and passes away, arises and passes away. This is not ours. It is not I, me or mine. We can ask, “What am I really believing right now?” “What am I afraid of” and whatever the answer, see how your body reacts.

Self-kindness and self-compassion can be very helpful if this gets stressful.

So we can go from “I hate this” to “there is hate arising” to “tightness” or whatever quality, and notice where that leads, staying with the breath until we see it go away or replaced by another sensation and therein lies our freedom, our refuge.

As we go through the process of RAINS, we may also find what’s happening interesting. “Wow, I am really getting worked up about this!” How did this reaction happen? It’s like a recipe with a lot of ingredients. Look at how pissed off I am! All of this conditioning has organized and whipped itself up to this – what a cake!”

The Buddha said that *sila*, ethics is our great protector. It is our body that enacts ethics, not matter what one says. I can be mindful all I want but it is my body that is typing the letters that make up the words that will create wholesomeness or unwholesomeness. In this way, the dharma is all about action. (Karma means action or deed) Our practice is not just about meditating or mindfulness but making the action and feelings of the body a refuge through which we live a skillful, honest, and happy life. We are not going to be free from being human and its biology until we pass away but we can be free from the clinging that causes our suffering. And also we can be free from the resistance to what our bodies are experiencing.

In this way, the body is a doorway or gateway for spiritual transformation.

Talk IV TRUTH: Compulsive Thinking Is Not the Truth

Laura Good 11/11/2020

We are going to explore the role obsessive thoughts can play in causing suffering especially when they seem to be uncontrollable and what we can do about it. We'll also investigate how Tara uses the "real but not true" technique to help be present with our obsessive thoughts and how it can release us from their power.

We can't stop thoughts. It's what the mind does; thoughts arise and fall, and we know that as "thinking". It's how we evolved. Everything humans have brought into the world, our technological achievements, our culture, our buildings, have started with thoughts and ideas in our minds. Yet so have the actions humans have done that have negative, violent consequences. We also know so much of our suffering comes from inside our minds.

Most of the time we know the difference between skillful and unskillful thinking. Skillful thinking is wholesome and causes beneficial results. Yes, we need to plan, to weigh hard decisions, to take our time with our thinking, sometimes complex issues take a huge amount of mind space, and it's how we use our powers of reason, perception and choice. Repetitive thoughts can also awaken us to fear and perhaps let us know we are in danger or to pay attention. But when these thoughts become stuck in a loop, beyond their immediate use, they can transition into a negative pattern and we feel driven into unskillful territory: we are obsessing.

Unskillful thinking is not only unwholesome but is also a false refuge. Instead of it helping us, it can seem to get out of control as if the thoughts have a life of their own. The more we try to NOT think of something the more we do. Elephant anyone? The thoughts become obsessive and compulsive, and it can seem impossible to stop them.

Why? Why would we want to engage in something that doesn't serve us? Very simply, to relieve anxiety.

"Obsessive thinking is an inability to gain control over recurrent, distressing **thoughts** and images. The process may be mildly distracting, or utterly absorbing. **Obsessive thoughts** and images are embedded in a complex network of feelings, sensations, and often, behavioral routines."

When we talk about **OCD**, The Mayo Clinic defines it like this:

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) features a pattern of unwanted thoughts and fears (obsessions) that lead you to do repetitive behaviors (compulsions). These obsessions and compulsions interfere with daily activities and cause significant distress.¹²

You may try to ignore or stop your obsessive thinking, but that only increases your distress and anxiety. Ultimately, you may feel driven to perform compulsive acts to try to ease your stress. (I tend to vacuum when I'm stressed) Despite efforts to ignore or get rid of bothersome thoughts or urges, they keep coming back. This leads to more ritualistic behavior — the vicious cycle of OCD.

What are types of OCD?

- Checking.
- Contamination/**Mental** Contamination.

- Symmetry and ordering.
- Ruminations/Intrusive Thoughts.
- Hoarding.¹³

Whether these patterns have a genetic predisposition or arise from trauma or extreme stress, or both, I'm sure we are all aware of our own tendencies (extreme or occasional) or that of some of our loved ones, to suffer from compulsive thinking at some points in our lives. Severe OCD in this talk will be left to the professionals. But even in those cases, mindfulness practice has been shown to help.

Nature of the Mind

In one of my early sitting groups I remember someone saying during meditation that her mind was always going to the worst case scenario and she even could feel her mind reaching for the worst of the worst: murder, torture, car crashes etc. She led a nice life and couldn't understand why, when she tried to meditate or quiet her mind, it would just go for the most outrageous extremes. I realized that I often experienced the same thing. These scenarios would seemingly have nothing to do with me or my past, it was like fear was playing a game in my head and I had no control. My teacher simply said, "it's just what the mind does". He had no further explanation or advice except for not judging or trying to push the thoughts away. Using breath, and awareness about how these thoughts felt in the body, I noticed that the thoughts became less and less frequent, like they lost their power to "come to life" in the mind. It rarely happens to me anymore.

It's just what the mind does

Having courage to let the thoughts be, lets the mind observe and practice non-judgmental awareness. The loops of thinking may have started from real circumstances, like maybe a severe car crash, that set a certain pattern of neurons to fire together, and sometimes we may not even remember what that was, but we know how it feels. Even when we know the source, once the pattern gets set, it's like grooves in a vinyl record, and our top ten hits of compulsive thoughts start endlessly playing. Then our body reacts, it feels so real.

Top Ten Hit Meditation

Pause: Don't try to stop, or get angry, or push your thoughts away. Have compassion for yourself.

Ask yourself what could be behind the rumination. Are they wanting thoughts about appearance or achievement? Are they fearful thoughts about loved ones, money, health, safety? Name the feeling behind the feeling: care, love, rest in the positive emotion.

Try to distinguish the depth of the unskillful thinking. If the obsessive thoughts are causing compulsive behavior (Ritualistic actions like excessive handwashing, exercise, drug or alcohol abuse, etc) it's time to get help by professionals. If the compulsive thinking has not resulted in harmful actions or behavior, perhaps using mindfulness is a place to start.

Use RAINS

R-Recognize you are suffering or in distress from the thoughts. Name it! "Ruminating." Try to name what's happening

A Allow it to be in your awareness
I-Investigate what's really true
N-Non identify with it
S-Self nurture

The Buddha's Teaching

Luckily, the Buddha gave a sutta on ending unskillful thoughts, The Relaxation of Thoughts Vitakkasaṅṭhāna Sutta¹⁴

In a blog, 5 ways to resist obsessive thoughts (Vitakkasanthana)¹⁵, Josh Korda, a teacher at the New York and Brooklyn Dharmapunx meetings summarizes the Buddha's teaching as the five "R's". In other words, the five ways to neutralize repetitive, invasive thoughts are (adapted from the blog):

1. Substituting Thoughts (**replace**)

"This is like when a carpenter uses one peg to knock out another peg that is stuck. In letting go we exchange something compelling for something greater in the long term" i.e. replacing with skillful thoughts like good will, compassion, generosity"

2. Analyze the Thoughts (**reflect**)

"If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, one should ponder the disadvantages of these unskillful thoughts. like one who has become disgusted by the carcass of a snake, dog or human." Ask yourself, "is this thought really serving me?"

3. Ignore the Thoughts (**reject**)

"If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, one should pay these unskillful thoughts no attention whatsoever, like one who trains himself to look away from sights unworthy of his attention."

Think of the thoughts like they are coming out of mentally ill person. Widen your sense awareness, touch your seat, feel the air, listen to arising sounds. Connect with the outside world, with what's in front of you.

4. Relaxing the Underlying Stress (**relax**)

"If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, one should relax the underlying physical foundation of the thoughts, like one who is stressed out and walking quickly relaxes by walking slower, or simply standing, or sitting, or lying down."

5. Physically Constrain (**remove**)

"If unskillful thoughts continue to arise, with teeth clenched and tongue pressed against the roof of the mouth, one should beat down and destroy the unskillful parts of the mind with the skillful parts"
—if the other method is relaxing the body, this in essence is substituting awareness of the thought by clenching the body, by creating pressure or tension in an area that will redirect our attention away from the obsessive thoughts.
—to be used as a last resort, after the first four methods have failed. Generally, this method is used to avert one's impulse to cause harm.

Other techniques:

BREATHE, count, put your hand on your belly and try to slow down your breathing.

Visualize the thought is a fishhook and you just swim on by without taking the bait. Or, if your compulsive thoughts involve another person, imagine you have scissors and are cutting ties between you and them.

Don't take the bait, don't get hooked. Break the trance, take the pause and gently remind yourself, "real, but not true" and give them friendly attention. There may be some information to learn, but it is only one part of the situation. All of these techniques help us to de-energize unskillful thoughts. Most simply are not true even though they can feel very real and have real effects in your body. Have faith in the dharma, have faith in your skills.

Rilke says, "I would like to beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers which could not be given you now because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

Talk V TRUTH: Core beliefs that are Real but not the Truth

John Schorling 11/18/2020

Tara states in *True Refuge* that “the greater the degree of early life stress or trauma, the greater the conditioning, and the greater the likelihood of deeply entrenched fear-based beliefs.”¹⁶ Why is this? Neuroplasticity refers to the ability of our brains to rewire and change. Our brains are very plastic when we are young, and they rewire all the time. When we have recurrent experiences, the connections become more well established, to the point that we aren’t even aware of their influence. “Although rooted in the past, our core beliefs feel current and true.”¹⁷ The good news is that neuroplasticity persists throughout our lives and we can rewire our brains no matter our ages, that “neurons that fire together wire together.” The connections that arise from what we pay attention to get reinforced, and those that we don’t pay attention to diminish. Functional changes in connectivity can be seen in the brain immediately, structural changes take more time, but there is good evidence that they occur.

We are on this path in the interest of gaining relief from suffering. Every time we wish things were different than they are, we suffer, and yet we still come up with reasons why our beliefs leading to our suffering are justified. When someone treats us in a way that we don’t think is appropriate, we may get triggered, and immediately think “they shouldn’t have done that”, or “that’s not fair”, and often our minds are off and running, creating the story to justify how we feel. Yet this just magnifies our suffering. “Our beliefs become our destiny- unless we see them.”¹⁸ The answer is not more thinking or more obsessing or more worrying, it’s becoming aware of these beliefs, inquiring into them and creating more space around them, and perhaps ultimately letting them go, letting go of the beliefs that are real but not true.

This doesn’t mean we have to stand by and do nothing when we see injustice but it does mean we can respond skillfully and with compassion rather than reacting out of anger or some other negative emotion.

So how can we do this? We can use RAINS, an inquiry into what is true. Inquiry can shine light on our beliefs, and once again insert a pause to allow us to question our assumptions, so “truth can shine through”. The process starts by **R**ecognizing what is happening, that something is amiss, becoming aware of how we are feeling, and just **A**llowing it to be. And then, when **I**nvestigating., I have found the question “When do I first remember feeling this way” to be particularly illuminating. Other questions Tara suggests we then use for investigating our experience include “What am I believing”, directing the question at the emotion that is arising. “What is it like to live with this belief?” can be used to investigate the felt sense of the belief, for all beliefs live in the body. “What would my life be like without this belief?” and “Who would I be if I no longer lived with this belief?” can provide insight into to non-identification.

This investigation needs to be kept connected with our present moment experience, and not just become an opportunity for more thinking and getting lost in thought, falling back into trance, below the line. It should be grounded in the body, remaining connected to both physical sensations and emotional feelings. As I have quoted before, Adyashanti says that “spiritual awakening all happens from the neck down.”¹⁹

This chapter (8) uses addiction as a portal. I have my own experience with this, having had my own issues with alcohol. When I started high school I started drinking, and like many folks who develop substance use issues, alcohol just made me feel better, took away an emptiness I felt, and helped me feel like I fit in. I never drank every day, but when I did drink, I drank a lot, and had a very hard time stopping. I recognized I had an issue when I was in my late 20's and I quit drinking for the first time then. Eventually I started again, but whenever I drank, I still had this compulsion to drink more. I was able to control my drinking, but it was a lot of effort so finally I just stopped, only drinking occasionally to celebrate on holidays. Then I began practicing what we are talking about, and working with the trauma of my childhood, which included growing up in a dysfunctional family with a lot of addiction, having my father die by suicide when I was 9, my mother remarrying a year later, us moving to another state, from a wealthy suburb to a poor rural town. One by one I have practiced with each of these, paying attention to the beliefs, finding where they lived in my body, and gradually letting them go. As I did this, I found the desire to drink which had been present for years dissipated, and I no longer felt the old need to numb every time I had a drink.

It's important to note that that help from a meditation teacher or therapist may be needed if the source of the difficult emotions is a too traumatic, and too intense when sitting with it to tolerate. If this is the case, the most compassionate thing we might do for ourselves is to ask for guidance. It can be very challenging to move toward rather than away from our fears.

So let's practice now using RAINS.

Finding a comfortable position, eyes open or closed as you prefer. Bringing attention to the body, noticing the weight of the body sitting, having some sense of being grounded, of being connected with the earth.

Now bring to mind a recurrent situation when you know you will have a strong negative emotional response. Notice the thoughts that arise. Bringing attention to the feelings, what is the predominate emotion?

Recognizing the emotion, is it possible to name it? "this is anger" or "this is disappointment". It may not be obvious what the emotion is, and if so that's fine.

Just Allow it to be, without judging it or needing to fix it or make it go away. If this is too difficult, then directing the attention elsewhere is fine, back to the breath or perhaps the feet or hands.

If you are able to be with the emotion, then Investigate it, noticing where you feel it in the body, and the characteristics of the associated sensations.

You can also choose to investigate further the source of this feeling, asking yourself:

"When do I first remember feeling this way"

"What am I believing", directing the question at the feeling that is arising.

"What is it like to live with this belief?" for beliefs always have a felt sense in the body.

“What would my life be like without this belief?”

“Who would I be if I no longer lived with this belief?” can provide access to non-identification.

These tightly held beliefs about the way things should be that trigger strong emotions often first arose a long time ago. Noticing this, that this is a reaction that was learned a long time ago and has been conditioned over years of experience, can help with **Not** identifying with it, the N of RAINS. It may be useful to acknowledge this by saying to yourself “not me” or “not mine”.

Being with difficult emotions is hard, and practicing **Self-compassion** can be very helpful. If the pattern you’ve encountered is one you would prefer to let go of, you can acknowledge this with kindness. You might practice this by responding to yourself as you would to a friend, with warmth and caring, and by answering the question “what do I most need now?”

Often there is a tendency to close down around difficult emotions, so it can be helpful to visualize them held in a larger space. Awareness is vast, so visualizing holding these beliefs and emotions in a larger space can be helpful, even bigger than the physical self. You can also envision how your wise self would respond, or you can imagine how a spiritual figure would respond to your suffering.

Just sit with this now, holding whatever is arising with spaciousness, compassion, and kindness.

When you are ready, letting go any images being held in the mind and returning the attention to breathing, or wherever else you might choose as an anchor. Resting the attention there and just breathing, and then opening the eyes once again if they have been closed.

Take a few moments now to notice the quality of presence, and to take note of what might have arisen for you during this meditation. Is there something in particular that called your attention that you might want to revisit? Whatever arises is ok.

Talk VI LOVE: Heart Medicine for Traumatic Fear

John Schorling 12/2/2020

During the initial meditation, we reflected on the following questions suggested by Tara:

1. With whom do you feel connection or belonging? Feel cared for or loved? Feel at home, safe, secure? This might be someone you know, or a spiritual figure, or even a pet.
2. When and where do you feel most at home- safe, secure, relaxed or strong?
3. What events or experiences or relationships have best revealed to you your strength, your courage, your potential?
4. What about yourself helps you to trust your goodness? What qualities do you like about yourself?
5. When you are caught in fear, what do you most want to feel? You might even express this to yourself in the form of a statement "May I feel... (safe, loved, held)"²⁰

Trauma, defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience, is very common. All of us experience some trauma in our lives. Most traumatic situations result in well-defined physiologic responses. The sensory input from an event enters the brain below the level of conscious awareness and, if a threat is detected, the amygdala, or threat detector in the brain, is activated. This in turn signals the sympathetic nervous system which controls the fight or flight response with an increase in heart rate and blood pressure. If fight or flight is possible, the sympathetic nervous system discharges, the stress hormone levels go down, and equilibrium can be reestablished. The memory of the event is then normally encoded in the hippocampus, the memory center in the brain.

However, if it is not possible to escape the threat, the freeze response may be activated. This is a protective response that counteracts the sympathetic nervous system and causes the heart rate to go down and muscles to relax. However, the sympathetic nervous system may still be activated by the threat, and these stress hormones can then inhibit the normal process of memory formation. The event may remain encoded in short-term memory and can then easily be reactivated. When this happens, the sympathetic nervous system is again stimulated with the release of stress hormones, and the emotions that were originally elicited may arise. In normal circumstances, we can evaluate the situation by observing and appraising what is happening, recognizing that we are not actually under threat. However, this process involves conscious awareness and the higher-level cortical parts of the brain. Stress hormones also inhibit the connections to this part of the brain, so the events may be re-experienced as if they are actually happening again since this evaluation process is interrupted.

Having events stored in short-term memory coupled with impaired cortical appraisal is most likely to occur with severe trauma, but aspects of this process may happen even with lesser traumatic events. Strong emotional reactions can still get triggered even if the memories of an event get encoded correctly. If this is the case, it is less likely to be experienced as if the event is happening again, and it is

easier to consciously appraise what is happening and choose a response. However, unless the beliefs underlying these triggers are addressed, they are likely to keep recurring.

Meditation and mindfulness practice can be very helpful in processing and resolving trauma. They also have the potential to amplify negative experiences related to trauma. Paying attention to present moment experience can result in reexperiencing traumatic events, and can initiate the fight, flight, or freeze responses. When these become the object of awareness, they may become more pronounced and may ultimately lead to feeling overwhelmed.

So how can we best process past traumatic events using mindfulness? In his book *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*, Daniel Treleaven lists five principles. His intended audience for this book is mindfulness teachers, but the points are relevant to practitioners as well.

1. **Stay within the window of tolerance.** It is important to pay attention to present moment experience and recognize when there is dysregulated arousal, either becoming too activated or too shut down. This can be practiced as part of the **Recognize** step of RAINS, noticing present moment experience and recognizing if we are becoming anxious, or if we are shutting down.
2. **Shift attention to support stability.** During meditation, we **Allow** our experience to just be what it is. We can also choose where to place the attention if whatever we are focused on is leading to dysregulated arousal. We can start by establishing stable anchors of attention, we can reorient our attention if needed, if what we are paying attention to seems to be too much. It can be helpful to focus on the external senses or on the environment (touch, sound, sight, smell, taste). We can also cultivate resilience and access resources that can help us to be with things as they are.

This resourcing is key. Doing this work of being with emotions like fear is hard, and we need to bring kindness and compassion to our experience in order to be able to be with our experience as it is arising. This is part of the **Self-nurturing** step of RAINS, which is listed last to make a nice acronym, but is best utilized throughout the process. Matt Goodman, another general internist/mindfulness teacher at the University of Virginia Medical Center (UVa), emphasizes “self-compassion first” which I agree with.

3. **Keep the body in mind.** Internal sensations can become activated by trauma- these sensations are largely how we know what emotions we are experiencing. When memories of trauma get activated, there is an associated felt sense in the body. If this happens frequently it can be disorienting, and may get suppressed. I believe that most of us cannot think ourselves out of this situation. This is not a top down process. The felt sense of trauma is experienced in the body and needs to be accessed through body awareness in order to be released. Ultimately, as Tara says, “In order to achieve freedom from intense emotions like terror or shame, *the felt sense of that pain needs to be experienced within an enlarged, enriched context.*”²¹ We need to develop resources we can use to create the space to be with and **Investigate** the trauma we may have experienced and which might still reside within us.

4. **Practice in relationship.** This is central to this topic. Tara discusses this at the beginning of chapter 9, when she notes the importance when working with fear of experiencing another person's caring accepting presence.²² She also notes that "the healing of trauma...requires waking from the trance of separation."²³ Trauma can get us stuck in feeling isolated and separated from others, different, ashamed, unworthy, caught in the small self. Practicing **Non-identification** can help us recognize that these feelings do not define us and that we are more than this small self. Feeling connected to others is also very important, and both the sangha and teachers can help provide this support.
5. **Understand social context.** As I have certainly become much more aware of over the past year, members of different groups have been exposed to varying experiences resulting in trauma due to institutionalized and systemic racism and discrimination, as well as both implicit and explicit bias. From an individual practice point of view, it is important to recognize the potential for these factors, whose roles have often been downplayed, can be significant sources of trauma.

We had the opportunity to inquire into ways of resourcing during the initial meditation with questions. Tara also includes a Tonglen compassion meditation at the end of the chapter.²⁴ Tonglen is a practice from the Tibetan tradition that means giving and receiving. In my experience, it can be quite powerful. I practiced this regularly when I was working on the inpatient palliative care service at UVa. Before making rounds, I would practice, bringing to mind patients on the service, breathing in their suffering and breathing out compassion. I found this very helpful in allowing me to be with their suffering and not feel the urge to withdraw.

Tonglen Meditation

Find a comfortable position.

Bring your attention to the natural rhythm of breathing. As you breathe in, receive the life energy of the breath, relaxing, letting go of resistance.

With the outbreath, experience the actuality of letting go, allowing the breath to mingle with the vastness of space.

Continue meditating on the rhythm of receiving, being touched by the inbreath, and letting go, sensing openness with the outbreath.

When you feel ready, bringing to mind a situation that evokes fear. Ask yourself "what is the worst part of this situation, what am I really afraid of?" Notice if a story arises and pay attention to the bodily sensations. What does the fear feel like? Where do you feel it most strongly?

Now as you breathe in, let the breath directly touch the place where you feel the most pain and vulnerability. Bring your full attention to any sensations of fear. Then as you breathe out, sense the openness of space that holds your experience.

You might place a hand on your heart as you do this, continuing to breathe in to the fear, and breathing out, surrendering your fear into open awareness. Breathing in to your suffering, breathing out with compassion. You might offer yourself a prayer “May I be free from this suffering, or May I feel safe and at ease.”

Now bringing to mind other beings who have experienced a similar fear, people you know and also those you don’t know. Breathe in on behalf of all those who share this suffering, allowing yourself to receive the fullness of their pain in your heart, opening your heart to its natural nonjudgmental state of kindness and spaciousness. Noticing if there is any resistance around the heart, and allowing it to dissolve. As you breathe out, releasing the enormity of this suffering into boundless space, perhaps offering a prayer for all who suffer to be free of their suffering. Allowing your heart to open to the truth of shared suffering, responding with compassion. Continuing to breathe in suffering and to breathe out care and compassion.

[Wage Peace](#)

by Judyth Hill

Wage peace with your breath.
Breathe in firemen and rubble,
breathe out whole buildings
and flocks of redwing blackbirds.

Breathe in terrorists and breathe out sleeping children
and freshly mown fields.
Breathe in confusion and breathe out maple trees.
Breathe in the fallen
and breathe out lifelong friendships intact.

Wage peace with your listening:
hearing sirens, pray loud.
Remember your tools:
flower seeds, clothes pins, clean rivers.

Make soup.
Play music, learn the word for thank you in three languages.
Learn to knit, and make a hat.
Think of chaos as dancing raspberries,
imagine grief as the outbreath of beauty
or the gesture of fish.
Swim for the other side.
Wage peace.

Never has the world seemed so fresh and precious.
Have a cup of tea and rejoice.

Act as if armistice has already arrived.
Don't wait another minute.

Talk VII LOVE: Seeing Beyond our Faults through Self-compassion

Robert Hodge 12/9/2020

The Refuge of Love (Sangha in Buddhist terms) is about seeking peace and nurturing in our relationships. When we act unskillfully and hurt others through our speech and actions, we not only affect our bonds, but we also hurt ourselves through self-blame. So, when we realize that we have been unskillful, we literally feel bad with bodily sensations of unpleasantness. Then, in addition, we feel mental anguish, blaming ourselves for what we have done. In his teaching, the Sallattha Sutta,²⁵ the Buddha used the metaphor of being struck with two arrows to illustrate the process.

The Blessed One said, “When touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical & mental. Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, were to shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pains of two arrows, in the same way, when touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical & mental.

The Buddha notes that when the uninstructed person feels physical pain, he becomes afflicted with mental anguish. The Buddha compares this to one who is shot with an arrow that causes physical pain and then shot with second arrow that causes mental pain. So, this person is afflicted with two pains, physical and mental. The mental pain comes from the mind but since he doesn't know that, he reacts with great lamentation.

As Tara notes, “the first arrow is our human conditioning to react with anger or fear to an unpleasant experience.... The second, more painful arrow is our reaction to these “failures.””²⁶

In this talk we will be confining our discussion to self-blame in our relationships with others.

For example, when encountering a person whom I felt wronged me in some way, I used harsh speech. Afterward, I have felt a tightness in my body with a headache. This is the first arrow of physical pain. Next, I felt remorse and guilt, blaming myself for saying what I said. This is the second arrow of mental pain. I vowed not to ever do this again but I do.

The first arrow causing unpleasant bodily sensations is a signal that one needs to deal with the issue and as the Buddha noted: “Now, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones, when touched with a feeling of pain, does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught. So, he feels one pain: physical, but not mental. Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, did not shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pain of only one arrow, in the same way, when touched with a feeling of pain, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught. He feels one pain: physical, but not mental.

How do we avoid the mental pain when we have been unskillful?

Tara tells the story of Sam who is struggling with uncontrollable bouts of anger towards his spouse, daughter, and others. After blowing up, he would feel ashamed and disgusted with himself for losing control. He would try apologizing but it seemed that feeling bad about himself would just set him up for the next outburst. In other words, his mental anguish of self-blame was not working.

What does *not* work is clinging to “our condemning thoughts as a way of controlling and hopefully improving ourselves.”²⁷ However, the solution is not to excuse ourselves; it is to release the ill-will we have toward ourselves. Tara notes: “When I talk about self-forgiveness, I don’t mean that we should excuse our hurtful behavior or give ourselves permission to act out. Instead, the aim is to release the self-hatred that closed our heart and contracts our mind.”²⁸

How do we approach self-blame?

Self-blame is attributing fault to yourself. Is it really your fault that you behaved unskillfully towards others? It is true that you committed the unskillful action but was it really within your total control?

If you were to investigate your unskillful behavior, you would find that as Tara notes: “The Buddha taught that the first arrow—the things about ourselves that bring up shame and self-loathing—is often beyond our control. Our deficits are shaped and sustained by innumerable forces. Many of us are born with genetic tendencies toward anxiety, aggression, or depression; we are brought up in cultures that are plagued by addiction and violence, by deception and greed. Our environment is full of pollutants that effect our nervous system in innumerable and unknowable ways. Our families of origin are often beset by financial difficulties, by conflict and misunderstanding, by trauma carried through past generations. And, crucially, how we treat ourselves and others is molded by how our own caretakers attended to us. **Some interplay of these forces generates the first arrow of painful emotions and compulsive behaviors.**”²⁹

Tara notes in her discussion with Sam: “The out-of-control anger is not your fault.” Then I paused and repeated myself. “It’s not your fault ... really.” Tears welled up in Sam’s eyes and I continued. “Please know ... You can learn to be responsible—able to respond differently—but that’s possible only if you realize that you are not to blame.”

I’ve said this to a lot of people, including myself, and it helps. That is because some wisdom deep inside us knows it’s true. We’d be better if we could. We don’t want to be caught in painful emotions and we don’t want to cause suffering in others.”³⁰

When this compulsive behavior arises, we just can’t vow to never let this happen again. We need to employ a method such as RAINS to go deeper and transform our behavior.

Tara continues: “If we become mindful of how our experience arises from a complex array of causes, we are at the threshold of an important insight: The compelling emotions that shape our self-sense are actually impersonal. Just as recurring blizzards or droughts don’t target a particular farm, our inner emotional weather is not owned by or controlled by this particular body and mind. Rather, it arises from causes beyond our individual existence.”³¹

She continues: “What if we could recognize our faults and look to see what is beyond them? What if we could see, with great tenderness, the painful unmet needs that have shaped our behaviors? For many of us, this process is the work of a lifetime, one that requires the active support of loved ones, therapists, spiritual teachers, or healers. Yet it begins the moment that we are willing to look at ourselves through the eyes of compassion.”³²

This is why this talk is named: Seeing Beyond our Faults through Self-compassion

In her recent book, *7 ½ Lessons about the Brain*, Lisa Feldman Barrett, a noted neuroscientist, explains how transformation occurs in our brain. Through the process known as neuroplasticity, the brain can configure itself into new distinct neural patterns creating new behaviors to emerge. As new information flows into the brain, some neurons fire together more frequently than others causing these changes. There are two processes called tuning and pruning that occur. Tuning is the strengthening of connections between the neurons and pruning is the less used connections weakening and dying off.

When you experience an encounter with another person, your brain makes predictions on how you react due to stored memories and beliefs. So, if you react unskillfully to what someone has said to you, it is coming from your past experiences. One way to change your behavior is to reprogram your brain and one way to do that is practicing RAINs.

Dr. Barrett notes: “Everyone who’s ever learned a skill, whether it’s driving a car or tying a shoe, knows that things that require effort today become automatic tomorrow with enough practice. They’re automatic because your brain has tuned and pruned itself to make different predictions that launch different actions. As a consequence, you experience yourself and the world around you differently. That is a form of free will, or at least something we can arguably call free will. We can choose what we expose ourselves to.

My point here is that you might not be able to change your behavior in the heat of the moment, but there’s a good chance you can change your predictions **before** the heat of the moment. With practice, you can make some automatic behaviors more likely than others and have more control over your future actions and experiences than you might think.

I don’t know about you, but I find this message hopeful, even though, as you might suspect, this extra bit of control comes with some fine print. More control also means more responsibility. If your brain doesn’t merely react to the world but actively predicts the world and even sculpts its own wiring, then who bears responsibility when you behave badly? You do.

Now, when I say responsibility, I’m not saying people are to blame for the tragedies in their lives or the hardships they experience as a result. We can’t choose everything that we’re exposed to. I’m also not saying that people with depression, anxiety, or other serious illnesses are to blame for their suffering. I’m saying something else: Sometimes we’re responsible for things not because they’re our fault, but because we’re the only ones who can change them.”³³

Reflection: Using RAINS with our self-blame

Recognition

Bring to mind an experience when you were with another and you exhibited unskillful behavior such as getting angry, using hard words, raising your voice. Recall the bodily sensations you felt

Allow

Let those bodily sensations be. Don't resist or deny them.

Investigate

Where are those sensations occurring in the body?

Can you recall other similar instances when you felt these same sensations?

Non-Identification

Can you see that those feelings are not you? They have just arisen, are impermanent, and will fade away.

Can you realize that you are not to blame entirely for these feelings that have arisen? That they occurred out of causes and conditions beyond your control?

Self-Compassion

Recognize that you may be feeling what Tara calls ““soul sadness,” the sadness that arises when we are able to sense our temporary, precious existence, and directly face the suffering that has come from losing life. We recognize how our self-aversion has prevented us from being close to others, from expressing and letting love in. We see, sometimes with striking clarity, that we have closed ourselves off from our own creativity and spontaneity, from being fully alive. We remember missed moments when it might have been otherwise, and we begin to grieve our unlived life.

Our soul sadness is fully revealed only when we directly, mindfully contact our pain. It is revealed when we stay on the spot and fully recognize that this human being is having a hard time. In such moments we discover a natural upwelling of compassion—the tenderness of our own forgiving heart.”³⁴

Give loving-kindness and understanding to yourself rather than being harshly self-critical.

Realize connectedness, that what we are going through is commonly experienced by all human beings and that everyone goes through difficult times.

“May I accept myself just as I am. May I be filled with loving-kindness, held in loving-kindness.

Next Steps

If there are any actions that you want to take such as making amends, state your intention to do so at a suitable time.

By using the RAINS process with self-blame issues, you are reprogramming your brain through neuroplasticity. This takes effort but it is well worth it.

As Lama Tsultrim Allione notes: “If you turn your awareness directly into an emotion it stops developing. This doesn't mean you are analyzing it or thinking about it but rather turning toward it with clear awareness.”³⁵

Talk VIII LOVE: Love, Anger and Forgiveness

Laura Good 12/23/2020

We are delving into the three jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and the Sangha which Tara Brach likens to Truth, Love and Awareness. In the last few talks, we've explored how compassion for ourselves and others can help us with many of the reasons we suffer, such as from fear and or trauma. Chapter 11 in True Refuge is called "The Courage to Forgive", but the sub-context is really, Love, Anger, and Forgiveness which could also be the subtitle to almost any family holiday. Even though most of us may not be physically with our extended families this year due to the pandemic, I wonder if many still feel the familiar emotional triggers that can happen around this time. In fact, if one of your first reactions you noticed is perhaps relief, this might be some fertile ground for you to explore now or at a later time.

Just because we are not in the same room as our family, trying to hold our tongues or not be hurt by some passive aggressive comment, doesn't mean the roots of those things have dissolved. We may be getting a temporary break from the unpleasant sensations, but this could be time to safely think about how these habitual reactions cause suffering and if they are preventing you from enjoying the people in your lives, just as they are.

So we have love and we have anger to talk about and we have forgiveness as the possible bridge between the two. We all know how those we love can make us the angriest at times. And many of us especially in the West have been taught that forgiveness is not only important for our relationships but also for our very soul. It's a heavy concept: to not only feel guilty because you are angry at those you love but if you don't forgive them you won't get into heaven. So much for the joyful holidays!

From a Buddhist perspective, forgiveness holds a different purpose which we'll go into later. First let's talk about the anger and fear that may be the cause of something that once done or said, by you or to you, needs to be forgiven.

Anger, Fear

We have talked about the biology of anger and fear several times in previous talks. We've evolved through millennia to survive by way of fear. Our body secretes hormones meant to protect and be useful when we are danger, we then quickly decide to fight or run and hopefully live another day.

But even in our so-called advanced society, we humans get trapped in warrior mode, replaying interactions in our heads, ruminating on what we should've said etc. Most of our daily experience is perceived threats. Though they are nonphysical, your body feels its fight or flight effects.

You get cut off; you get offended as if being offended is the worst thing in the world that could happen. And anger explodes in an instant.

Anger can be intelligent and help us not only clarify but survive. It helps us identify and make our boundaries, shape our communities and society, keeps us going until things are changed. Turning helpless emotions into anger, like seeing kids in cages during the immigration issue is a key to protecting human rights.

One of my favorite sayings is: I'd rather be offended than be oppressed. This statement affirms our freedom and the society we live in. Hooray! We are free enough to take offense. There are places in the

world where it would be life threatening to register our offense, especially if you are a woman. Offense is not going to change laws.

Courage

Before we move to forgiveness, we need to have the courage to just start naming what is really going on.

Pema Chodran, an American Tibetan Buddhist nun, notes: “The Buddhist teachings tell us that patience is the antidote to anger and aggression. Patience has a lot to do with getting smart just waiting: not speaking or doing anything. On the other hand, it also means being completely and totally honest with yourself about the fact that you’re furious. You’re not suppressing anything—patience has nothing to do with suppression. In fact, it has everything to do with a gentle, honest relationship with yourself. If you wait and don’t feed your discursive thought, you can be honest about the fact that you’re angry. But at the same time you can continue to let go of the internal dialogue. In that dialogue you are blaming and criticizing, and then probably feeling guilty and beating yourself up for doing that. It’s torturous, because you feel bad about being so angry at the same time that you really are extremely angry, and you can’t drop it. It’s painful to experience such awful confusion. Still, you just wait and remain patient with your confusion and the pain that comes with it.

.... You let the words go and just be there. This suggests the fearlessness that goes with patience.”³⁶

Ask yourself: “Who are you really mad at?” (As my mother, an English teacher would correct me, “At whom are you really mad?”)

While in our brain, the limbic system is doing its thing with fight or flight, we can rely on our prefrontal cortex to help us calm down and reason what is most effective path . Pause, take a breath, take refuge in our meditation training. Is your anger or suffering rooted in a past that has come and gone but you still hold onto it every day? Or do you hold on to it to keep score?

Forgiveness

The meaning of forgiveness is grounded in the language of debt. Ken McLeod notes: “When we view interactions with others in terms of debt, we are, wittingly or unwittingly, reducing our relationships with others to transactions. “I owe you” or “You owe me” now becomes the defining expression of the relationship.”³⁷

Some even keep a score in their heads for holding their tongue and “being compassionate”. “Oh but what I could’ve said! See I was being so nice.” This is not helpful. You are causing yourself suffering and still blaming the other person for inspiring your critical thoughts.

Some would even say that forgiveness is self-interested and not very Buddhist. That it is still a form of power held over a person or relationship, to be wielded when certain conditions are met. A bank doesn’t hold onto the relationship when a loan is repaid, but when we hold onto an emotional debt, our relationships suffer. Whether or not someone is forgiven has nothing to do with the karmic actions that caused the action in the first place.

Forgiveness may not be able to undo old bad karma, but it can prevent new bad karma from being done.³⁸ For example, there is a “bad deed” and there is the feeling that results, like revenge. In Pali it’s called vera. Vera is often translated as “hostility,” “animosity,” or “antagonism.

“He insulted me,
hit me,
beat me,
robbed me”
—for those who brood on this,
vera isn’t stilled.

“He insulted me,
hit me,
beat me,
robbed me”—
for those who don’t brood on this,
vera is stilled.

Veras aren’t stilled
through vera,
regardless

Veras are stilled
through non-vera:
this, an unending truth.

—*Dhammapada 3–5* The *Dhammapada*, a popular collection of early Buddhist poems

So, in other words, forgiveness can be thought of as bringing kind attention to the conflicts in your life. Acknowledge the anger, the animosity. See how it shifts in the mind and the body. Use RAINS. Don’t try to forgive prematurely, instead shift focus to what is hurting inside of you, where is the fear, where is the anger how does it feel. Acknowledging is not condoning. Can you let anger/rage just be there? How does it feel in the body? See how it changes, by being present, it will change. You may notice grief, sadness. Don’t worry about the forgiving part, try to focus on the opening part.

“We can’t will ourselves to forgive—forgiving is a product not of effort but of openness.”³⁹ You can’t will forgiveness but you can be willing. If it is your sincere intention to forgive, the door is already open.”⁴⁰

How to Forgive

“Forgiveness means letting go of aversive blame. It does not mean we dismiss our intelligence about who might hurt us or we stop taking precautions to protect ourselves”

We use discernment – which is almost impossible to do when we are in the heat and throes of anger. Forgiveness is the letting go of ill will. Sometimes it’s helpful to focus on staying open rather the forgiving at first.

The Buddha recommends⁴¹ ways to help you deal with any lingering feeling.

The first is to remember that we’re all in the process of dying, and you don’t want thoughts of vera (revenge, animosity) to get in the way of a skillful death.

The second, is to develop thoughts of infinite goodwill “free from vera, free from ill will.”

The third tactic is to take on the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, and no taking intoxicants.

Self-forgiveness

What about when you have done the wrong? How do we get through the anger to forgiveness to love?

- We admit what we did and acknowledge the harmful consequences of our action.
- We remove any justification or defensiveness.
- We renew our connection with spiritual practice, mindfulness.
- We try to remedy or disrupt the pattern that led to it in the first place.
- We resolve to not act that way again.

It has been sad that Unexpressed Anger + time equals depression. Sigmund Freud used to refer to depression as anger turned inward.⁴²

Dealing with anger involves so many factors, some would say that these develop over lifetimes. Sometime the root source of the anger is that you want life/person/a situation to be other than it is. Or at least made more kind so there is less suffering.

What is the true refuge here? Awareness, the practice. Radically looking at our anger, our love and how it feels and not doing unskillful things because of it. This is how things are. We get hurt, we hurt others. When we are aware, we can avoid, protect and prevent and still let go. We can stay open and then whether or not we call it forgiveness is up to us. The refuge here is that we have the courage to let our armor fall away, to trust we won't fall apart even if it feels like we are

Talk IX LOVE: Compassion for All

John Schorling 1/6/2021

Today we are going to be talking about compassion. This is a topic which I care a lot about as a physician because it is fundamental to caring for others. Compassion is often defined as the recognition of the suffering of another with a desire to alleviate it. It is based in empathy, which is the capacity to understand and share another person's emotional experience. The distinction between the two is important for a number of reasons.

As humans our brains are wired both for empathy and for tribalism, for dividing others into in- and out-groups. With regard to empathy, when we are in the presence of someone who is experiencing an emotion, we pick up on it since similar parts of the brain of the observer are activated as in the person who is experiencing the emotion. These are based in mirror neurons as Tara mentions in this chapter. Being able to do this allows us to relate to and connect with others. How much we share the experience is related to how closely we identify with the other person.

In a study partially done at UVA,⁴³ research subjects received an electrical shock while their brains were being scanned. While still being scanned, they then watched others receive a shock, both someone who they were close to and a stranger. How much the brain regions that were activated overlapped between getting a shock and watching someone get a shock depended on the closeness of the relationship: the closer the subject said they were to the person getting the shock, the more the activated regions overlapped. This will probably come as no surprise to anyone who has children as the emotions our children experience can feel like our own. This has been referred to as the “merging of self and other”. Because empathy arises automatically for most people, when in the presence of suffering, especially repeated suffering, it can lead to feeling overwhelmed, which has been referred to as empathic distress.

Tara begins this chapter in True Refuge by talking about the “unreal other”, the tendency we have as humans to view those unlike us as “other”. That we often view others through the lens of tribalism also has a defined neurologic basis. It is presumably evolutionarily based in that through most of human history we have been under threat from others. Our brains have evolved such that we connect with those closest to us, in our families and our close communities, very easily, and create social bonds that promote cooperation. We find it equally easy to view others outside our social group as different, as not equal, and as potentially dangerous. Our ancestors who were especially good at this may have had a survival advantage in defending their resources and territory, and thus increased the likelihood that these traits would be transmitted to future generations.

Categorizing others as potential threats occurs automatically, below the level of conscious awareness, and can activate the amygdala in the brain which controls the fight, flight or freeze reactions. This can then lead us to react negatively to those who are perceived as “other”, and we can easily develop a story about them to justify our reaction. This process has many potential negative results, including implicit bias and systemic racism.

We can interrupt these automatic processes by pausing, bringing attention to our present moment experience, and practicing **RAINS**. In the case of empathic distress, if we pause, we can **Recognize** what is arising: that if someone is in pain we may also feel pain, and we can notice our tendency to want to react, to fix it or withdraw. However, if we can **Allow** what is arising to just be, we can **Investigate** our reaction with curiosity, perhaps noticing “I’m feeling uncomfortable, what’s up with that?” and recognize that our mirror neurons have been activated. This recognition helps us **Not-identify** with what we’re experiencing- “oh, I’m uncomfortable because I am in the presence of someone who is suffering. I can be aware of their pain, but I do not have to take it on as my pain”. In my work as a palliative care physician, doing this was crucial for me in order to be able to be with others on an ongoing basis who were really suffering. It allowed me to be aware of what they were experiencing without taking it on myself, and ultimately to get closer to them without feeling the need to withdraw to protect myself.

The same process can be used when we notice we are triggered by someone viewed as the “unreal other”. **Recognizing** what is arising (I noticed I felt uncomfortable and looked away so I didn’t have to acknowledge that person), **Allowing** this to be, **Investigating** it (for instance, asking “What am I believing?”), **Not identifying** with the experience (this arose automatically, it does not define me and I don’t need to judge it).

This can then lead to compassion- first for our **Selves**. Being truly present with others who are suffering, or who are perceived as different, can be challenging, and recognizing that we may be falling short of our expectations for ourselves can lead to self-judgment. Can we respond with **Self-kindness** instead? This is practicing self-compassion first, which I believe is really necessary to be truly compassionate with others. It is practicing what anyone who has flown has heard many times from the flight attendants “In case of emergency, should the oxygen masks deploy, put your mask on first before helping anyone else.”

Once we have done all this, we can then truly practice compassion for others. While empathy arises automatically, compassion is an intentional process, and involves the prefrontal cortex, the thinking brain. We notice the suffering of another with the intention of doing what we can to alleviate it. Part of the process is choosing how best to respond- what would be most helpful in this situation? Sometimes it might be an action like physically helping someone be more comfortable, sometimes it might be really listening, sometimes it might just be being present and sitting with someone. As Tara says, “Our relationships have the potential to be a sacred refuge, a place of healing and awakening. With each person we meet, we can look behind the mask and see the one who loves and longs to be loved. We can remember to say our blessings out loud.”⁴⁴ Doing this requires us to be mindful, to be aware of our own reactivity, and to respond with kindness for ourselves and each other.

Compassion involves different parts of the brain than empathy does, and in particular includes the nucleus accumbens which is part of the reward network. While empathy can be draining and lead to distress, compassion can be sustaining and lead to positive mental states. Compassion fatigue used to be a term commonly used for those experiencing burnout in helping professions. This is now felt to largely be inaccurate, and most compassion fatigue is actually empathic distress. Practicing compassion is much more likely to not only benefit those who receive it, but also those who extend it.

Here is a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh that beautifully expresses the power of compassion:

Please Call Me by My True Names⁴⁵ – Thich Nhat Hanh

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow —
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay

his "debt of blood" to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Talk X LOVE: Losing What We Love: The Pain of Loss

Laura Good 1/13/2021

We've had a week to reflect on what happened on Jan 6 and what is still happening. We've seen video after video of unrestrained rage, rage about information that was a lie perpetuated by a leader who can't face losing.

It occurred to me that our society doesn't really teach people how to lose. We may learn to be resilient or somewhat wise, but loss still hurts.

We will all lose a lot of things over the course of our lives. The Buddha said, "If one is asked, 'From what requisite condition do aging & death come?' one should say, 'Aging & death come from birth as their requisite condition.'⁴⁶ I think one of the reasons we fear loss so much is we aren't taught how to do it.

Can we get good at "loss"? As we age, if we are aware, this skill happens naturally. We think of ourselves as kids losing a favorite toy or baseball game and we can still probably feel what it was like but not fall apart because, of course, we have perspective.

For life to flow there is continual birth and death all the time. This is life. We all know this. It is the nature of things. We can go Buddhist and refer to it as impermanence, but this doesn't fully encapsulate the grief and the emotional and physical pain that can result from a deep loss.

Tonight, we'll talk about how one can view loss as a gateway to freedom and some ways to deal with the suffering that can occur, so we find true refuge.

We often make big projections in the future to help us feel better in the moment. A promise made to yourself when you are 10 may not work out so well when you are 30, but the fear of losing your dreams can prevent you from realizing the suffering the dreams may be causing.

What are you losing when life doesn't work out according to your plan? An imagined future of an imagined self whose happiness was dependent upon a series of specific events.

But what was are you really losing?

Ignorance. Fear. Delusion. Most people would welcome that loss. Clarity can hurt, but it is also kind. What each of us define as "loss" is personal but the feeling is universal.

Letting go of something that stays fixed in our minds means we are losing our suffering, not the connection to the person or thing. It's just that the connection is always changing.

We define suffering as wanting things, life, people to be different from how they are. We suffer because we forget who we are and instead get stuck in a trance and mental proliferation.

Jack Kornfield says, "The Four Noble Truths insist that we face our pain, the pain in our body and mind and the pain of the world. They teach us to stop running away. Only by courageously opening to the

sorrow of the world as it is can we find our freedom. This is the demand placed on all who would awaken.”⁴⁷

Opening to the “sorrow of the world” sounds daunting. Like, I have enough to deal with in my little life than tackling the sorrow of the world. In fact, most of what I notice that makes me suffer I wouldn’t call “sorrow”. I’d call it daily annoyance. Or reading too much bad news.

There are different translations of the pali word for suffering “Duhkka” is defined as “stress” or dissatisfaction”. This central term is best understood alongside the related word [sukha](#). The prefix *su-* generally means “good, easy, and conducive to well-being,” and the prefix *du-* correspondingly means “bad, difficult, and inclining toward illness or harm.” On the most basic level, then, *sukha* means pleasant while *dukkha* means unpleasant.⁴⁸

But a life full of constant dissatisfaction is sorrowful. Then add to that the inevitable truth, that we will lose people we love.

False Refuge

So, we may reach for false refuges, like self-medicating with drugs or alcohol or trying to control everything. We may know the feeling of a parent constantly running after a toddler, so they don’t run in the street. And we do that knowing someday that child will die. Hopefully after a long happy life, but once that child is an adult can we really have much control? Do we even want it? Regardless of how that relationship develops, we fear its loss. We may fear it like nothing else in the world. But letting ourselves believe control will prevent that loss is a false refuge.

Self-blame can also be a false refuge. It can be a way of trying to take control of a situation. “If I had done xyz” or “If only I had been there”. This is just another way of trying to blot out the fear.

Another false refuge is bargaining. “If my illness goes away I promise I’ll...”

What Have You Lost?

Let’s start by looking at how we’ve dealt with loss in the past. We’re just going to make some mental lists at first and then dive in deeper after.

As matter of factly as you can, ask yourself:

What do you consider your greatest losses?

Then, mentally put them into categories as lost opportunities, lost dreams, lost jobs, etc.

Can you then qualify them as major/minor losses?

Notice if some events you always thought of as major losses have, over time, gone into the minor column.

Does even that subtle act of categorizing them shift where you feel them in your brain or your body?

Now ask yourself, “What did I really lose?” a few times. Let whatever rises up be there. Status? False sense of security? Hang out on the edges of grief.

Now, if you choose, move a little closer to a deep loss, such as a person or something dear.

First without reliving it, or with any perspective think about what it felt like, emotionally and physically. Now, with the same event, imagine you had all the wisdom in the world supporting you, does it change how you feel?

How does it affect me now and where do I feel it in the body?

If one of the losses that comes to mind is a person or relationship, has the grief changed over time? Is it grief from what happened or the loss of what could've been? Or both?

Are you afraid if you let go of the grief, to let it change, the connection with that person will be gone? Acknowledge the fear.

Love More, Not Less

Thich Nhat Hahn tells us the answer to loss is to "love more, not less."⁴⁹

Hanh states that to truly let go we must learn to love *more completely*. Non-attachment only happens when our love for another extends beyond our own personal expectations of gain, or our anticipation of a specific, desired outcome.

So, letting go of our grief means diving in. But we can do it slowly, we can tip our toes in at the edge as we learn to sit with loss.

Be thankful, the depth of grief shows you were deeply connected. How wonderful to have a connection with another human! They affected you, you affected them, hopefully with love.

The truth of impermanence is also the truth that we are not separate.

Clinging to things that are impermanent can cause suffering. It is not wrong to be attached and to love someone, it is the clinging to the idea that they will never change or die that causes suffering.

Letting Go

As Ajahn Chah said:

"If you let go a little, you will have a little peace.

If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace.

*If you let go completely, you will have complete peace.*⁵⁰

He also said: "If the body could talk, it would be telling us all day long, "You're not my owner, you know... If our body really belonged to us, it would obey our commands. If we say, "Don't get old," Or "I forbid you to get sick" does it obey us? No! It takes no notice."⁵¹

Tara writes that illness can be an accelerated course in letting go, in humility and humiliation. As we get sick and closer to death, the image of ourselves as a "good: or spiritual person can quickly fall apart.

We can't let go of our grief if we can't let in our vulnerability, let whatever emotions come to light.

Ungrieved Loss

Is there an ungrieved loss?

Let emotions flow.

Recent research suggests emotions only last about 90 seconds, after that we have to keep sustaining them.

According to Harvard brain scientist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, ninety-seconds is all it takes to identify an emotion and allow it to dissipate while you simply notice it. When you're stressed, pausing ninety-seconds and labeling what you're feeling (eg., *I'm getting angry*), tamps down activity in the amygdala. "When a person has a reaction to something in their environment," she says, "there's a 90-second chemical process that happens in the body; after that, any remaining emotional response is just the person choosing to stay in that emotional loop."⁵²

Rumi:

Forget the future.

I'd worship someone who could do that.

if you can say, There's nothing ahead,

*there will be nothing there. The cure for pain is in the pain.*⁵³

If we can open to the edge and soften we can see what is really there. Is it ungrieved loss? Is it making us numb to connecting with the life that's here now?

Letting the sorrow be as it is not what you think it should look like is a key to healing.

Be open

Stay in the body

Allow yourself to be ok

Know your triggers

Find your refuges

Ask for help/witness.

Be present with what connects you

Make the u-turn.

"Love more, not less."

Talk XI AWARENESS: Trusting Who We Are: Part 1

Robert Hodge 1/20/2021

In these next two talks, we are going to explore the Refuge of Awareness which in the Buddhist tradition is called the Refuge of the Buddha.

The Refuge of Awareness

In *Refuge, An Introduction to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha*, Thanissaro Bhikkhu writes: “The Buddha, on the external level, refers to Siddhattha Gotama, the Indian prince who renounced his royal titles and went into the forest, meditating until he ultimately gained awakening. To take refuge in the Buddha means, not taking refuge in him as a person, but taking refuge in the fact of his awakening placing trust in the belief that:

- he did awaken to the truth,
- that he did so by developing qualities that we too can develop,
- and that the truths to which he awoke provide the best perspective for the conduct of our life.”⁵⁴

In other words, there are three aspects of the Buddha: The Buddha as a historical figure, the Buddha as one who attained awakening and the Buddha as a teacher of the truths to which he awoke. We will be focusing on the latter two aspects, the Buddha as one who attained awakening and how we can follow in his path by developing these same qualities.

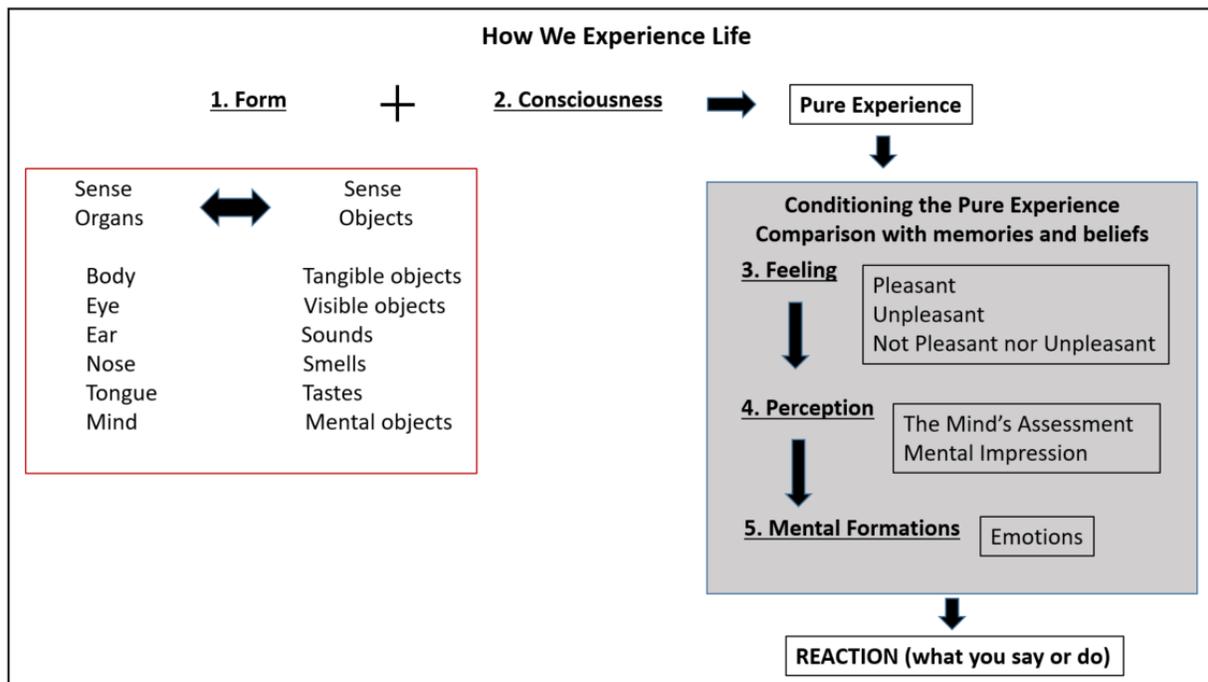
Thanissaro Bhikkhu goes on to say: “On the internal level, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are the skillful qualities we develop in our own minds in imitation of our external models. For instance, the Buddha was a person of wisdom, purity, and compassion. When we develop wisdom, purity, and compassion in our own minds, they form our refuge on an internal level. The Buddha tasted awakening by developing conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. When we develop these same qualities to the point of attaining awakening too, that awakening is our ultimate refuge. **This is the point where the three aspects of the Triple Gem become one: beyond the reach of greed, anger, and delusion, and thus totally secure.** This is also the point where we become members of the ideal Sangha, providing an example for anyone else who wants to find the same security inside.”⁵⁵

What is Awakening?

Tara defines awakening as a liberating moment of realizing your true nature as changeless, luminous awareness.⁵⁶ To some, this comes as a distinct sudden happening. For most, it is a gradual process of realization.

What is Awareness?

Awareness is defined as knowledge or perception of a situation or fact. In order to have that knowledge or perception, we need to be conscious of it. Consciousness is one of the five ways that we experience life. Through consciousness we make contact with and experience form (the senses: bodily sensations, sights, sounds, tastes, sound, and thoughts). What follows with each experience is the conditioning from our mind: feeling (specific bodily sensations from form which are pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), perceptions (from our stored memory), and mental formations (emotions). This process happens very quickly and the mind registers this after the fact. How we experience life is shown below. The conditioning by mind is shown in the grey area.



We cannot prevent this conditioning but by understanding this process we can see why we suffer and that it comes from within. With this wisdom, we can use a process such as RAINS to free ourselves. When we have an experience that results in, for example, anger, we can **R**ecognize it and **A**llow it to be, and then **I**nvestigate each component by replaying it: “What was the pure experience?” “What did I feel in the body?” “What was my perception?” “What mental formations arose?” “What did I say or do in response?”

This requires mindfulness to choose to be aware of each stage of our processing. Mindfulness is defined by Bhante G. as paying attention moment to what is.⁵⁷ According to the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, Sati is the pali word translated as “mindfulness” or “memory” and is commonly used in

meditative contexts to refer to the ability to remain focused on a chosen object without forgetfulness or distraction. When we are being mindful, we are remembering to look for the “what is”. We can start our training by learning to discern pure experience from conditioned elements of feeling, perception, and mental formations.

Discerning Pure and Conditioned Awareness

Here are three exercises to help you discern pure experience and conditioned experience.

Touching

Close your eyes and allow your hand to touch the surface of an object close to you. Can you experience just the touching or are you discerning whether the touching is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, the identity of the object and any emotions that might arise as the result of the touching? If you are, just go back and just be with the touching.

Hearing

Close your eyes and listen for any sounds. Can you experience just the sound or are you discerning whether the sound is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, the identity of the sound and any emotions that might arise as the result of your hearing the sound? If you are, just go back and just be with the hearing.

Replay the Experience

Bring to mind a recent experience that was unpleasant. It could be from an action, a relationship, conversation, meeting, difficult decision, etc. Replay that experience. What was the pure experience that may have triggered the unpleasantness? What did you feel in the body and where was it? What was the perception (mental impression, judgment)? What mental formations arose? What did you say or do?

In doing this exercise, you may find it beneficial to write down the answers. Don't worry about not being able to remember everything or wondering if your recall is accurate. What you do remember is what is stored in the mind regardless of its completeness or accuracy. This is what needs to be addressed in the process of replay as this is what is contributing to the suffering. If it is appropriate or feasible, you might ask others involved for their remembrances. You might even find that they don't remember it at all!

By investigating each of the processing steps, we can realize the “what is” and the role our mind played in the conditioning and subsequent suffering. The next step is to ask ourselves, “Did the mind give me a true perception of the experience? Or was it just doing its best because it was only able to create the perception based on stored memories and beliefs?” The mind can only operate from the pure experience and the comparison with held memories and beliefs. Thus, any perception that we have is conditioned. While we can't erase the memories, we can examine and let go of our beliefs if they are not true. By doing this experience, we are taking advantage of neuroplasticity and rewiring our neurons.

As a simple example, this afternoon, an unpleasant bodily sensation (feeling) arose when I could not find my watch. The emotions of sadness and frustration arose. I decided to replay this situation. I realized that the pure experience was the thought that I could not find my watch. The unpleasant bodily feeling that arose was followed by the perception that I was careless and not reliable. This perception arose

from the mind comparing this with previous experiences when I had lost something and had been critical of myself. The mental formation of sadness and frustration of loss arose as part of the conditioning. By replaying this experience, I become aware of each step of the process. I could see that my mind was blowing this out of proportion. Am I generally careless and unreliable based on this experience? Seeing how I have had that watch for 5 years, probably not. Also, applying self-compassion, I reassured myself. I also noted that this experience is part of being human. I would not have the same judgement toward another if they had lost their watch.

Using RAINS to examine your replay of unpleasant experiences is the way to build your awareness and develop a different relationship with your mind. We can understand its limitations and that by letting go of our beliefs through this process, we build more trust in who we are.

In the next talk, we will be exploring more on awareness and how to let go of our beliefs.

Talk XII AWARENESS: Trusting Who We Are: Part 2

Robert Hodge 1/27/2021

In the previous talk, we explored awakening, awareness and how our pure experience is conditioned by the mind based on our past memories and beliefs. We learned how to discern the pure experience from conditioned experience through some simple exercises. We also practiced replaying an unpleasant experience using a step-by-step investigation of the process. As Matt Flickstein, one of my principal teachers said: "Realizing for ourselves that the power to achieve contentment comes from within requires an understanding of how our thinking process controls our behaviors and, thereby, our results."⁵⁸ To paraphrase Ayya Khema: "Everything is mind-made."⁵⁹

Pure awareness rests in the pure experience. The state of pure awareness is boundless. When conditioning occurs, our mind puts boundaries (limits) on what we experience. Certainly, in our everyday life, we need to use our conditioned perceptions to identify objects and speech in order to communicate with others, but we also have to be aware of effects of the limitations that we impose in doing so. For example, when we have an unpleasant experience with another, that experience remains as a memory for the mind to recall the next time we encounter that being and the memory conditions our perception. We can't prevent the mind from doing that but if we are aware of this, we have a choice to go back and remember and replay the current original pure experience to see the manner in which mind conditioned it. We can then choose to view that being as a stranger, one whom we have never encountered. From there we can choose our actions. This is actually going back to the state of not knowing, being open to possibility.

Three states of awareness

As we live our everyday lives, we move back and forth between three states of awareness.

The first and most common state is **conditioned awareness**, living our everyday life without really paying attention to our conditioning and reacting from it. Our actions are governed by our perceptions seeking what we feel is best for us. As the Buddha taught, in this state, we go through life swept by the eight worldly conditions or winds which are beliefs of seeking gain, avoiding loss, seeking pleasure, avoiding pain, seeking praise, avoiding criticism, seeking fame, and avoiding disrepute.⁶⁰ Yet, as we live our lives this way, we suffer. We are not truly happy and peaceful because we are grasping what we consider to be positive (e.g. gain) and resisting what we consider to be negative (e.g. loss).

The next state is **mindful awareness**. This is when we start observing our actions through mindfulness. We start to see how things really are and with this new consciousness, we start to feel less attachment to our concern with the worldly conditions and we start to let go of our beliefs and accept reality. We feel a sense of freedom and lightness of being. This is the beginning of awakening, realizing our true nature.

Bhante Gunaratana (Bhante G.) discusses the role of mindfulness in awareness: "Thus the more you focus on mind itself, the less solid it seems. Like everything else that exists, it is always changing. Moreover, you discover, there is no permanent entity; no one is running the movie projector. All is flux, all is flow, all is process. **In reality, who you are is simply this constant flow of changing moments of mind.** Since you cannot control this process, you have no choice but to let go. In letting go, you

experience joy, and you taste for an instant the freedom and happiness that is the goal of the Buddha's path. Then you know that this mind can be used to gain wisdom."⁶¹

The third state is **pure awareness**. This is when we have those moments of pure (or unhindered) awareness. We are not aware of the pure experience because there is no consciousness of the concept "we"; there is just being. We will explore later this in the contemplation, Beyond Beliefs.

What prevents us from being in Pure Awareness?

As Tara notes, one of the major barriers is our focus on our self. If we examine the concept of the self, the basic function of our self (brain) is to help us survive. In *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain*⁶², Lisa Feldman Barrett notes that the brain's most important job is to control your body's energy needs so that you can survive to pass your genes on to the next generation. Thinking is just a function of the brain to support survival; it is the default mode which places us in the first state of awareness. Moving to the second state requires us to more closely observe what we are really doing in the first state of awareness and to move beyond just surviving. In other words, we need to widen our perspective beyond the self. And we need to remember what Bhante G. stated before: "Moreover, you discover, there is no permanent entity; no one is running the movie projector." As Kalu Rinpoche notes: "If we can reach the understanding of what we actually are, there is no better remedy for eliminating all suffering."⁶³

Trusting who we are

In order to trust who you are, it is beneficial to explore who you aren't. Tara talks about when she was trapped in her trance of self. In this trance, she was the center of the universe and the star of the show. These were her beliefs that led her to a total focus on one's self and well-being and excluding others. Tara needed to let go of these beliefs in order to realize her true nature.

It is not possible to will pure awareness. Instead, we have to start letting go by continually reminding ourselves of who we are not and freeing ourselves from these attachments. As Tara notes: "This inquiry turns us toward the timeless refuge of pure awareness. When we ask ourselves, "Is awareness here?" most of us probably pause, sense the presence of awareness, and say yes. Yet every day we restlessly pull away from this open awareness and immerse ourselves in busyness and planning. Our conditioning prevents us from discovering the peace and happiness that are intrinsic in taking refuge in awareness. Seeing how we paper over the mystery of who we are is an essential part of finding freedom."⁶⁴

Beyond Beliefs Reflection

(based on Douglas Harding's work)

We can use this reflection to build trust in who we are.

Begin by closing your eyes and following your breath.

The first question is where are your boundaries now? Do you have boundaries, on present evidence? What is your shape at this time? Do you have a surface where you stop and your environment begins? What is the shape of that surface, that envelope which contains you? What envelope, what surface, on present evidence?

Do you have *any* shape now, let alone a human shape? How do you know I'm not a wonderful magician that's turned you into an animal? How do you know I haven't done that? Perhaps I have.

Without moving them, count your toes. Toes? What toes? Or your legs, for that matter? Do you have, on present evidence, any shape at all, let alone a human shape? Isn't it imagination which makes a human body here at this moment?

Are you a thing in a great big environment, or are you Space or Room or infinite Capacity? Well, is it infinite? Can you find any boundaries to the environment, let alone to this nonexistent nuclear object in it?

How tall are you, on present evidence? Don't you go on and on and on, upwards, sideways, downwards, frontways, backways? Is there any limit to you, and is there anything in the middle, any central object in this vast, limitless Capacity which you are? You are the authority – look to see.

Another name for this Capacity is Silence. Are you not now the Silence into which these sounds are dropping? The sounds come and go. Everything that changes dies. Sounds are born into your Silence and die out of it. Silence itself – what can die there? Are you not Silence for sounds, just as you are now infinite Space, Capacity, for all sorts of sensations, like warmth, one or two little tensions, a sense of pressure somewhere? Lots of sensations. And they are all coming and going, aren't they? But are you coming and going?

Then, of course, in this Space, in this Capacity, arising all the time is a great succession of thoughts, of images and ideas, clothed with feeling, arising here in the Space, flourishing, disappearing. Thoughts and feelings are born, flourish, and die in the awareness, the awakensness, of this great Space. Is there anything Here to perish? Isn't it like being an infinite television screen on which the program is sometimes tragic, sometimes comic, sometimes rough, sometimes mild? Shoot-ups, burnings are all going on without effect on the screen. You don't have to clean up or repair it after a wild West program. Isn't this what you are like, this immaculate, infinite Screen? What are you now but this awake, invulnerable Capacity?

On present evidence, what nationality are you? What is your name, occupation? What are your qualifications, on present evidence? Is there anything that survives here and now from those regions - the regions of your address, telephone number and nationality - to tell you Who you are? On present evidence, how old are you? Does age have any meaning now? On present evidence, what sex are you? Can you find anything at all, any of those characteristics with which you had identified so strongly? We build that little one up, spend our lives building a picture of who we are as human beings. Isn't it out there in your imagination? Is it Who you really are at the Center of your life? Isn't all that stuff peripheral and not given Here and not given Now? In other words, all that self-image which we had accumulated is not oneself. Who are you at this time on present evidence? What can you say?

What do you need now to be yourself? Do you need any of that accumulated stuff to be yourself? If you needed it, wouldn't you feel discomforted now? Wouldn't you feel you had been robbed? How do you

feel? How does it feel to be stripped of everything you had identified with, that you had spent so much energy and enthusiasm building up Here, this personality, these achievements, these qualifications? How does it feel to be peeled of that stuff, to lose sight of it, to let it go, to have it taken away from you? Do you feel angry, disgusted, insulted? Do you feel you have come to a strange, dangerous, horrible place where you don't belong? or do you feel that you have dropped many, many burdens, all burdens really, falling like leaves from a tree with such ease and with such readiness, and that you have come Home to the place where at last you are unburdened of all things, the place which is your bedrock and your eternal home? Because if you feel that, I would say that you are awake to Who you are.

I put it to you that you are not, in fact, able on present evidence to say what you are, to say, "I am this" or "I am that" giving answers such as nationality and name and age and sex and humanness and all those other things. If you could, it would be the death of you because all that stuff dies. Like the morning dew, it perishes. But it's impossible now to find any of those things What can you say? I suggest you can say one thing and one thing only: *I am*.

Whose name is that? *I am*. Is that the name of the one who will perish, or is it the name of the only One who will not perish? *I am*. This is your identity, is it not? Is there a more prestigious, marvelous name to have than that? Do we deserve it? Are we built to that divine design? *I am*, and even beyond *I am*. *I am* is too complicated. You rise, with no help, from the unspeakable, the unknowable, the mystery.

Doesn't it feel absolutely in order, right, true, comfortable? Isn't this entry into our true nature, and haven't we been this all along, but we just didn't notice it? Isn't this our Homecoming? You are the authority – look to see.

In a moment, you will open your eyes and flood this Space with color and shape. Does your name change from *I am* when you flood the Space with shape and color and movement? I suggest your name will still be *I am*, the name of the One who does not perish. Let us try it now. Open your eyes and flood your vision with the wonderful view. Your name remains, I suggest, *I am*.

In the next talk, we will explore more of the concept of self.

Talk XIII AWARENESS: Trusting Who We Are: Part 3

Robert Hodge 2/3/2021

In the previous talks, we explored awakening, awareness and how our pure experience is conditioned by the mind based on our stored memories and beliefs. We learned how to discern the pure experience from conditioned experience through some simple exercises. We also practiced replaying an unpleasant experience using a step-by-step investigation of the process. Then, we explored the three states of awareness – conditioned, mindful, and pure. We can choose to be in either of the first two states. However, the state of pure awareness cannot be willed; it requires us to let go of our concept of self and be aware of our conditioning. We practiced this through the reflection, Beyond Beliefs, to discover what we are not and that we are simply *I am*. Letting go of the concept of self and our beliefs is the work that we face.

No-self or Not self?

When we focus on what is not self, does that mean that there is no self? We have discovered that there is *I am* but we often get lost in the concept of self and forget who we are. One of the challenges is that the concept of self is stored in our memory and updated regularly. *I am* is not. Jack Kornfield and Thanissaro Bhikkhu explore this challenge further.

Jack Kornfield notes: “Deep meditation can untangle the sense of identity. There are, in fact, many ways in which we can realize the emptiness of self. When we are silent and attentive, we can sense directly how nothing in the world can be truly possessed by us. Clearly, we do not possess outer things; we are in some relationship with our cars, our home, our family, our jobs, but whatever that relationship is, it is “ours” only for a short time. In the end, things, people, or tasks die or change or we lose them. Nothing is exempt.

When we bring attention to any moment of experience, we discover that we do not possess it either. As we look, we find that we neither invite our thoughts nor own them. We might even wish them to stop, but our thoughts seem to think themselves, arising and passing according to their nature.

The same is true of our feelings. How many of us believe we control our feelings? As we pay attention, we see that they are more like the weather-moods and feelings change according to certain conditions and are neither possessed nor directed by our consciousness or desires. Do we order happiness, sadness, irritation, excitement, or restlessness to come? Feelings arise by themselves, as the breath breathes itself, as sounds sound themselves.

Our body, too, follows its own laws. The body which we carry is a bag of bones and fluid that cannot be possessed. It ages, gets sick, or changes in ways we might not wish it to, all according to its own nature. The more we look, in fact, the more deeply we see that we possess nothing within or without.”⁶⁵

Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes: “No-self or Not-self? One of the first stumbling blocks that Westerners often encounter when they learn about Buddhism is the teaching on anatta, often translated as no-self. This teaching is a stumbling block for two reasons. First, the idea of there being no self doesn’t fit well with

other Buddhist teachings, such as the doctrine of kamma and rebirth: If there's no self, what experiences the results of kamma and takes rebirth? Second, it doesn't fit well with our own Judeo-Christian background, which assumes the existence of an eternal soul or self as a basic presupposition: If there's no self, what's the purpose of a spiritual life? Many books try to answer these questions, but if you look at the Pali Canon—the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—you won't find them addressed at all. In fact, the one place where the Buddha was asked point-blank whether or not there was a self, he refused to answer. When later asked why, he said that to hold either that there is a self or that there is no self is to fall into extreme forms of wrong view that make the path of Buddhist practice impossible. Thus the question should be put aside. To understand what his silence on this question says about the meaning of anatta, we first have to look at his teachings on how questions should be asked and answered, and how to interpret his answers."

Thanissaro Bhikkhu goes on to say that the reason the Buddha said that there were some questions that should be put aside was because they don't lead to the end of suffering and stress. This is one of those questions. Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes that most writers who try to interpret the anatta doctrine are drawing inferences where they shouldn't be drawn because this question should be put aside.

Reflection on Self

Close your eyes. Touch the seat on which you are sitting. Bring your awareness to the seat. Now ask yourself, "who is touching the seat?" You might say that, "It is me." But who is me? Can you find anything of your "me", "I" or "mine"? Or are you just experiencing touching the seat? Can you get the selfless nature of touching the seat? A self is not required!

The point is that we exist; we know we exist, but we cannot proceed any further with this inquiry because we cannot define this entity any further. If we try to go further, we end up merely embellishing the concept of self. We add to the store in our memory of all of those attributes that we explored in the reflection, Beyond Beliefs. When we use the word, self, in language, it means "a person's essential being that distinguishes them from others." We can only do so when we are referring to the concept of self, not the *I am*. Who we are may or may not be distinguishable from others but what does it matter in terms of freeing ourselves from suffering?

So the doctrine of anatta is not about distinguishing whether or not there is no-self but it's about realizing and letting go of the concept of self. Thanissaro Bhikkhu states this as **"In this sense, the anatta teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness.** At that point, questions of self, no-self, and not-self fall aside. Once there's the experience of such total freedom, where would there be any concern about what's experiencing it, or whether or not it's a self?"⁶⁶

Thanissaro Bhikkhu in another treatise notes: "So, to repeat, the issue is not, "What is my true self?" but "What kind of perception of self is skillful and when is it skillful, what kind of perception of not-self is skillful and when is it skillful?"

We already engage in these perceptions all of the time and have been doing so ever since we were children. We have many different perceptions of self. Each sense of self is strategic, a means to an end.

Each comes with a boundary, inside of which is "self" and outside of which is "not-self." And so our sense of what's self and what's not-self keeps changing all of the time depending on our desires and what we see will lead to true happiness.

Take an example from your childhood. Suppose you have a younger sister, and someone down the street is threatening her. You want to protect her. At that moment she is very much your sister. She belongs to you, so you will do whatever you can to protect her. Then suppose that, when you've brought her home safely, she begins to play with your toy car and won't give it back to you. Now she's no longer your sister. She's the Other. Your sense of your self, and of what is yours and not yours, has shifted. The boundary line between self and not-self has changed.

You've been doing this sort of thing — changing the boundaries of what's self and not-self — all of the time. Think back on your life — or even for just a day — to see the many times your sense of self has changed from one role to another.”⁶⁷

“Rather than a human on a spiritual path, we are spirit discovering itself through a human reincarnation.”⁶⁸

So, in summary, we exist and it is pointless to go further with this inquiry because our mind cannot conceive otherwise without creating the concept of self built on our memories and beliefs of who we are in the mundane world. And this concept of self is constantly changing.

Letting Go of the Self

When we experience dissatisfaction, we tend to focus on this from the concept of self. “I am dissatisfied.” “I am angry.” When we realize that dissatisfaction and anger are attributes of not-self, we can loosen and let go of our attachment to them. Anger, for example, is just a mental formation that arose from the mind. It is impermanent and not-self. So we can deal with it just like we have with the other issues in this series: by using RAINS. We recognize that we are suffering from anger and we allow ourselves to be with that unpleasant bodily feeling. We then investigate the perceptions that we have and realize that this is just conditioning by the mind which caused the mental formation of anger to arise. And we are reminded that it is not-self (non-identification). Finally, we offer ourselves self-compassion as we are human.

How does this relate to Pure Experience?

As noted previously, it is not possible to will pure awareness. Instead, we have to start letting go by continually reminding ourselves of who we are not and freeing ourselves from these attachments. By shifting to the state of mindful awareness, we let go and rewire our neurons through neuroplasticity. This allows us more opportunity to rest in pure awareness.

Talk XIV Reflections on Taking True Refuge Series

2/10/2021

In this talk, each of the teaches shared their reflections on the series

John Schorling

I've really enjoyed teaching and participating in this series with Bob, Laura and all of you who have taken the time to join us. It has been a real joy to be here and be part of this. Thanks to Bob for compiling the talks- I read back through them and I think they are really informative.

As I have shared here previously, practicing RAINS has been very important to my own journey on this path, and has certainly contributed to the alleviation of my own suffering. Like much of mindfulness practice, it is simple but not easy, and I want to review some of the challenges in practicing RAINS that we've discussed here.

One important lesson from this series is avoiding getting caught up in thinking when we are practicing RAINS. Getting lost in thought is easy to do because we are well-educated and used to solving problems cognitively. But this just leads us below the line in Tara's figure of trance. To get out of trance, we have to bring our attention back to our present moment experience, to be with what is happening right here, right now, especially in our bodies. We can Recognize what's arising, Allow it to be, and Investigate it.

A second lesson is that Investigation often has two parts- the first is being with the experience itself, the second is recognizing the belief that underlies the experience.

This is where the real action is in my experience, asking what am I believing and when did I first remember feeling this way? These are powerful questions and can be challenging as they may lead us to face difficulties we have encountered in past, and yet ultimately may help us untangle our conditioning. This was touched on in the poem Laura read tonight in the line "There is great strength in the darkness."

This process can also set off thinking and storying again, and when this happens, we can just bring the attention back to the body. This is key, bringing the attention back to the body- as Bessel van der Kolk says "the body keeps the score". Letting go of the story is often necessary, and again was touched on in tonight's poem in the line "Ask yourself what you're willing to give up to be free."

Whatever arises can we just be with the feeling without identifying with it- can we be with the hurt with kindness and compassion for ourselves? In Bob's talk (XII part 3), he talked about the importance of recognizing that this is not self. Not self is really important- there is no solid self to hold on to, yet we try to do this all the time. This leads to suffering. When we recognize and acknowledge this, it can help us to let go.

Again, we often have to keep coming back to the body in order to not get caught up in the story. As Tara says, our present experience is real but not true- real because we feel it, but not true because we are not still the person who had the original experience.

So what is truth- along this path, truth is the dharma. Our conditioning keeps us bound to the small self. As Bob noted, we can be aware of our conditioning with mindfulness. But to get to pure awareness, we have to let go of the conditioning, and practicing RAINS can help with this.

Finally, I think it is important to remember that we have opportunities to practice this all the time, not just when we're meditating. Mindfulness includes both formal meditation and informal practice or mindfulness in everyday life.

When we get triggered, bringing attention to our bodies in real time is a very powerful way of interrupting the cycle of reactivity, of inserting a space between stimulus and response, that space where there is a choice, a choice in which lies our growth and our freedom as Viktor Frankl has said.

We can also practice non-identification in the moment, noticing our tendency to get caught up in trance and fall below the line. We can step back and ask if is this skillful, contributing to liberation, or is it an attempt to control, to solidify around some concept of the self?

This doesn't mean we have to be complacent, to not act when appropriate. Years ago when Sharon Salzberg was first studying in India, she and a friend were robbed while riding in a rickshaw. Afterward, when they asked their teacher what he would have done, he responded with something like: "With all the loving-kindness in your heart, you should have hit that man over the head with your umbrella."

Finally, we are practicing Vipassana, insight meditation. RAINS is an insight practice, and can provide us insight into our own experience, and also insight into the true nature of the way things are.

I first started practicing RAINS about 10 years ago when I attended a retreat led by Tara Brach, and this has been a principal component of my practice ever since. As well-educated people who like to read, it can be tempting for us to read one thing, and then move on to the next when something new catches our attention. Yet it is often depth rather than breadth that leads to greater insight and freedom from suffering. In his book *A Path with Heart*, Jack Kornfield calls this "finding the one seat" - finding a path that resonates and sticking with it.

Tara's work and RAINS has largely been this for me.

Laura Good

When I feel the need to take refuge, the usual suspects appear first. The need to be alone, to figure things out, in my bedroom, on my meditation cushion, with a warm candle, hot tea and cozy blanket. But this safe cocoon is not my refuge. My practice is taking the "I, me or my" out of it. This helps even more, an unwavering invitation that softens any blow I perceive to be happening. Refuge is not a place we go to, it is a part of us. It does not belong to me, yet I am part of it. And the more I am willing to let whatever is happening to just be, the more I know the unwavering experience of refuge. It is experiential and sometimes takes the leap of letting go to feel its supporting net. If we get lost in too much thinking or believing that the way to freedom is in ever more and more books and concepts that somehow will help us evolve into a being immune to pain or suffering, we have taken a detour away from the truth of what is really happening.

So even in the times of our deepest distress and suffering, the answer is to “love more, not less”. To live trying to know the “why’s of life, knowing you may never know. But we do one thing, the refuge of the dharma can always be counted on to support us as we support others.

Robert Hodge

In preparing for this reflection on the series, I reviewed all of the talks in the talk and took notes on what called to me. During my review, I was trying to deal with an issue with my 9-year-old Jack Russell, Sophie. About two weeks before, she stopped jumping up on the couch and then a few days later she would not bend her neck down to eat. She also started crying when I tried to pick her up. I informed my vet who said that she probably was having some neck or back pain and he prescribed some pain killers. I had to change prescriptions because the first one didn’t seem to alleviate her condition. Then she started to wobble from her hind legs when she would walk. I took her in for an examination, and my vet told me that she probably had a herniated disk and that he would try some steroids with her but if she didn’t get better soon, she would need an MRI and probable back surgery.

This has been a very stressful and painful experience for me. Throughout this episode, I recognized the mental formations of sadness, depression, fear, and anxiety arising. I started applying RAINS. I allowed these mental formations to be and I noticed very unpleasant and almost overwhelming bodily sensations and perceptions that included I was responsible somehow, I was not doing enough, and she would never be the same again.

At the same time, I read an article by Jessica Colburn, *The In-Between*, which she describes as the space where one is being unable to return to the life before and yet not knowing what the future will hold.⁶⁹ I was in that space and as I reviewed the talks in our series, I was looking for guidance. So, the following is what I gleaned from my review that I applied to my situation. (The talk number is in parentheses.)

Taking refuge (I)

Clearly, I wanted to take refuge. I found another description of refuge to share: “What we call “taking refuge” consists of fully entering the Way. It’s a commitment with one’s entire being to walk in the footsteps of the Buddha, an example of openness, to listen to the dharma and its teachings, and to lean on the community of all those who practice Buddhism.” Fabrice Midal *The Pure Joy of Being*⁷⁰ This was my commitment.

RAINS (II)

John’s summary of RAINS and how to practice it is a wonderful reference and worth going to back to as I did. I can’t emphasize enough the elements of the acronym contain the ways to process one’s suffering.

The Refuge of Truth

RAINS is more than a cognitive process (III)

When we **Allow**, we are feeling this in our body. When we investigate, we are feeling what is in the body. When we give ourselves, self-compassion, it is in the body – like a hug. In the process of dealing with this issue, I found that I needed to be in the body as noted. It wasn’t pleasant but it, for me, was the only way to take this head on.

Compulsive Thinking is not the Truth: it is just the mind trying to drive home a point. (IV)

I was experiencing compulsive thinking as I mentioned above. I needed to deal with the repetitive messages from the mind. In her talk, Laura mentioned the 5 R's (Replace, Reflect, Ignore, Relax, Remove) and I tried all of these with some success. The most successful was going to the breath which after a period of time helped me to still the mind.

Core beliefs are not the truth (V)

My suffering was coming from my belief that Sophie was permanent, and I wanted to go back to life with her as it was. This perception is just what is stored in our mind. My perceptions were conditioned and not what is. I had to keep reminding myself of this.

The Refuge of Love

You can't think your way out of fear. (VI)

How could I deal with my fear? John mentioned to keep the body in mind and do Tonglen meditation. This was very helpful to breath in my fear and let it go, sensing the openness of space. Also, as John noted, practice in relationship by sharing your experiences was also very useful to me. Sandy and I shared our anxieties, and I knew that I was not alone in this.

Self-blame (VII)

I was doing a lot of self-blaming and not accepting that causes and conditions were at play. It was not my fault. This was very helpful to keep reminding myself of this.

Compassion for All (IX)

I found myself in a state of empathic distress over Sophie's condition. Turning to offering her compassion in my meditation helped to relieve that distress and give me more clarity.

The Refuge of Awareness

Pure Awareness (XI-XIII)

It all comes down to saying yes to life by letting go of what the mind is telling me and accepting what is. By focusing on Sophie rather than my concept of self, I was better able to deal with her problem.

¹ Brach, Tara. True Refuge (TR) Random House Publishing Group

² TR pp. 7-8

³ TR pp. 45-46

⁴ [Vera Sutta](#) (AN 10:92)

⁵ TR p. 46

⁶ TR p. 62

⁷ TR p. 63

⁸ TR p. 61

⁹ Not Yours [Na Tumhāka Sutta](#) (SN 35:101)

¹⁰ [Evolution's Body](#) by Wes Nisker

¹¹ The Great Establishing of Mindfulness Discourse [Mahā Satipatthāna Sutta](#) (DN 22)

¹² <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/obsessive-compulsive-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20354432>

¹³ <https://www.ocduk.org/ocd/types/>

¹⁴ <https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/MN/MN20.html>

¹⁵ <http://dharmapunxny.com/2010/01/5-ways-to-resist-obsessive-thoughts.html>

¹⁶ TR p. 119

¹⁷ TR p. 119

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- 18 TR p. 121
- 19 Adyashanti: Spiritual Awakening and the Body <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooa9bo3Y6HE> .
- 20 TR pp. 148-150
- 21 TR p. 147
- 22 TR p. 140
- 23 TR p. 141
- 24 TR p. 159
- 25 The Arrow [Sallattha Sutta](#) (SN 36:6)
- 26 TR p. 162
- 27 TR p. 164
- 28 TR p. 165
- 29 TR p. 166
- 30 TR p. 166
- 31 TR p. 167
- 32 TR p. 170
- 33 Barrett, Lisa Feldman. Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain (p. 62). HMH Books
- 34 TR p. 172
- 35 [Feeding Your Demons](#): Five steps to transforming your obstacles—your addictions, anxieties, and fears—into tranquility and wisdom, from Tsultrim Allione
- 36 Shambala Sun March 2005
- 37 <https://tricycle.org/magazine/forgiveness-not-buddhist/>
- 38 <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/three-tactics-forgive-without-defeat/>
- 39 Brach, Tara Radical Acceptance p. 261
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- 41 <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/three-tactics-forgive-without-defeat/>
- 42 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201710/the-role-anger-in-depression>
- 43 (<https://academic.oup.com/scan/article/8/6/670/1611749>)
- 44 TR p. 213
- 45 [Thay's Poetry / Please Call Me by My True Names \(song & poem\) | Plum Village](#)
- 46 [The Great Causes Discourse Mahā Nidāna Sutta \(DN 15\)](#)
- 47 [Suffering and Letting Go - Jack Kornfield](#)
- 48 <https://tricycle.org/magazine/dukkha-meaning/>
- 49 [Thich Nhat Hanh: The Art of Letting Go \(upliftconnect.com\)](#)
- 50 https://www.dhammatalks.net/Books/Ajahn_Chah_No_Ajahn_Chah.htm
- 51 ibid
- 52 [The 90-Second Rule That Builds Self-Control | Psychology Today](#)
- 53 [Rumi: The Book of Love by Coleman Barks, Rumi | Book Excerpt | Spirituality & Practice \(spiritualityandpractice.com\)](#)
- 54 [Titlepage | Refuge: An Introduction to the Buddha, Dhamma & Sangha \(dhammatalks.org\)](#)
- 55 ibid
- 56 TR p. 256
- 57 Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness p. 193
- 58 Flickstein, Matt Journey to the Center: A Meditation Workbook 1998
- 59 [Ayya Khema: Awake and Aware \(vipassana.com\)](#)
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- 61 Gunaratana, Bhante, Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path (p. 216)
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- 63 Kalu Rinpoche, Luminous Mind in Daily Wisdom: 365 Buddhist Inspirations
- 64 TR p. 252
- 65 Jack Kornfield A Path with Heart [No Self or True Self?](#) P. 198
- 66 Thanissaro Bhikkhu [Titlepage | Refuge: An Introduction to the Buddha, Dhamma & Sangha \(dhammatalks.org\)](#)
- 67 Thanissaro Bhikkhu [Selves & Not-self The Buddhist Teaching on Anatta](#)

⁶⁸ TR p. 263

⁶⁹ Colburn, Jessica The In-between JAMA February 2, 2021 page 435 Vol 325, Number 5.

⁷⁰ Fabrice Midal [The Pure Joy of Being](#)