

Untying Knots
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White Hall Meditation
July 29, 2020

All of us have certain things that tend to trigger strong emotional reactions. We are often aware of them, and may externalize their causes.

If feeling a lack of respect from others is a trigger, we can be quick to rationalize our reaction as being justified because other people “should” be respectful. If we just feel that respect for others is a desirable but not necessary quality, we might note its absence, yet might not be angered by it. Someone else might not be angered by lack of respect, but would be by being perceived as not working hard. We might say to ourselves “Don’t they know how much I’ve put into this?”

These strong reactions often feel natural and justified, and we may not question them. They are our reality, like the water David Foster Wallace used to describe them in this story from his 2005 Kenyon College commencement address when he said: “There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?’”

Yet when we do pause to notice these reactions, we can often begin to see patterns, such as observing, “Oh, when I perceive a lack of respect, I notice I feel anger”. One of the things I noticed when I started practicing this was that I often felt a need for approval, and would feel anger if I felt dismissed.

So where do these strong beliefs come from? Many of them originate early in life, most often from our families of origin. Our brains are very plastic when we are young, that is, they are making new neural connections all the time. These pathways get laid down and are very persistent. They can be changed as the neurons in our brains are rewiring their connections all the time, but it is not easy.

As we learn how to fit in to our families growing up, and internalize the rules, we often view them as just the ways things are, or should be. For instance, if we grew up in a family that emphasized loyalty, we might have a strong reaction to loyalty not being valued in the workplace. If these patterns were initially associated with some form of trauma, they may be especially strong. These rules were adaptive when we learned them, but they may be less so as we grow older. A clue to when this is happening is the use of “should” or “must”. Whenever we think or say “I should”, “you should” or “they should”, it is an opportunity to pay attention, and to ask “what am I feeling?”, “where do I feel it?”, and “what am I believing?”

These beliefs aren’t good or bad, they’re just a result of our conditioning. There are times when we might want to act as if they are correct. But if we’re not curious about them and don’t investigate them, we will just react automatically, and play out the same old patterns, even if it is not the most skillful thing to do.

So we can begin to notice them, and be curious about them. What if we decide they are not helpful and want to let go of them? Is recognizing them enough? Not usually. Recognizing them can give us more

choices, for if we pause when we notice we've been triggered, we can choose our response. But actually letting them go is more difficult because the memories, emotions and bodily sensations are separate from our cognitive, language based brain.

Neuroscientists have described two ways of knowing ourselves that involve two distinct neural networks.

Narrative self reference refers to knowing ourselves across time, being able to think about the past and the future. This network involves more midline structures and language centers in the brain.

Experiential self reference involves knowing ourselves in the present moment, is not language based, and involves more lateral brain structures. **This network is essential for healing trauma, as it appears that being able to access feelings and associated physical sensations is key to being able to resolve it. Since it is not language-based, we can't just think or talk ourselves through it.** The insular cortex seems to be key, the part of the brain where we process interoception, the physical sensations from inside the body. This part of the brain is beneath the outer cerebral cortex, and is closely associated with the limbic system, where memories and emotions are processed.

Psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk says in *The Body Keeps the Score*: "Only by getting in touch with your body, by connecting viscerally with yourself, can you regain a sense of who you are, your priorities and values" (p 247).

So for true healing to happen, we need to open to our present moment experience and to touch in with the wounded parts of ourselves. This is hard to do, and requires self-kindness and compassion, what is sometimes referred to as resourcing.

We need to call upon the resources of kindness and compassion to allow us to be with what is most difficult. Laura talked about this in Session V of the Compassion for Ourselves and Others Series when she quoted Jack Kornfield and the need to not push down negative feelings but to surround them with loving energy so they can "dis-charge", and begin to loosen a bit. In my experience, this is a literal description. There are physical sensations, which may be quite strong, that are associated with this discharging.

Adyashanti says that "spiritual awakening all happens from the neck down. Truth is moving through our bodies. A lot of energy in the body needs to be freed up- sometimes this feels good, sometimes not. When there are blockages, they need to be freed up." He notes that there is always some energetic process that is part of awakening. His advice is "relax and let it happen".

So let's explore this 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 were the circumstances? What were you believing about yourself?

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. What would your life be like without this belief? Who would you become if you no longer lived with this belief? Whatever arises is ok.

The resourcing we just practiced is often a key to untying the knots that underlie all the shoulds in our lives. Can we be with what is arising with compassion, noting that this way of reacting that we have identified was almost certainly adaptive when we learned it (it probably allowed us to get through difficult situations at the time). However, it may now have outlived its usefulness and letting it go might be the most skillful thing we can do. Often this doesn’t happen right away. The same pattern may persist, although perhaps a little less intensely. Just like a very tightly tied knot, it can take a while (sometimes years so lots patience and self-kindness may be necessary) to loosen it before it can be completely undone.

In my own experience, I came to understand that the feelings of anger and abandonment I felt in certain situations were a consequence of how I learned to deal with my father’s death when I was young. He died of a self-inflicted gun shot wound when I was nine. I suppressed all emotions relating to this event for many years, assisted at times by copious quantities of alcohol. When I finally really began exploring

them as part of my meditation practice, it took some time (as in several years) to recognize these emotions, as I first tried out less strong labels (like feeling the need for approval as I mentioned earlier rather than abandonment, and not even acknowledging anger). Allowing them to be was challenging, and required visualizing holding them in a space larger than myself. When I investigated the accompanying sensations, I at times felt quite intense physical pain. If it didn't happen only when I was meditating, I would certainly have gone to see a doctor for it.

When I asked myself when I had first felt these emotions, the answer was immediately clear. I was then able to accept that these feelings arose out of my circumstances and did not define me. Once I did this, I was able to gradually let them go, but only after I was able to accept the kindness others felt for me and that I felt for myself. Ultimately the physical sensations dissipated completely, and I often have very little reaction now to situations that would have triggered strong feelings in the past.

This process can be quite challenging and, in my experience, in the end can be even more rewarding. 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 a challenging journey to untie these knots that have been so tightly bound for years.