

Spirit Rock Meditation Center
Wednesday morning meditation class

December 23, 2009
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THE POWER OF MINDFUL EMPATHY TO HEAL TOXIC SHAME

Sylvia [Boorstein] asked me to teach this class today because we have been engaged in exploring together this confluence of Buddhist teachings with the wisdom of contemporary relational psychology in the West -- Sylvia is saying that relationships are the 9th step of the 8-fold path -- and the emerging brain science that is validating the efficacy of both mindfulness practice and compassion practice to change brain structure and brain functioning. Dan Siegel, a psychiatrist at UCLA and founder of the Mindful Awareness Research Center there -- you may have heard him teach with Jack Kornfield, Jack teaches on the Wise Heart, Dan teaches about the Mindful Brain -- Dan suggests the brain circuitry we cultivate with mindfulness for inner attunement, noticing and naming what's happening in our body sensations, our mental constructs as they arise and pass away, is exactly the same brain circuitry we use to attune to the inner experience of another, in empathy.

Today I want to explore how we can skillfully apply Mindful Empathy to help us hold and heal through, end the suffering of, one of the more afflictive hindrances to practice, to realizing our true Buddha Nature. That is the sense of failure, rejection, shame that catches us in the suffering of the belief that we are bad or unlovable. And, as Annie Lamott says about her mind -- that her mind is a dangerous neighborhood; she tries to never go there alone -- we're not going into the territory of feeling unlovable alone either. We're recovering a sense of our own goodness, our own lovability and lovingness with mindful empathy; everyone here in this room has had their share of self-doubt or low self-esteem, so we're exploring how to end the suffering of that in the field of benevolence of this sangha, this community this morning.

We now actually know some of the neurobiology of feeling unlovable, so I'll describe this state of mind-body-heart we call shame and the conditions that cause it to arise in our experience, universally in the human condition, how it gets stuck in our neural circuitry, our implicit memories, so that is hard to let go of, and then really focus on how mindfulness and empathy -- awareness and a compassionate acceptance -- can hold and heal it through.

I'll begin with a Buddhist teaching story I've heard here on retreat. If you take a teaspoon of salt and stir it into a glass of water, and then you take a sip of the water from the glass, Ick! It's too salty to drink. If you take a teaspoon of salt and stir it into a large lake, and then take a glass of water from the lake and take a sip of water from that glass, the salt is completely dissolved in the vastness of the lake. You can't taste it at all.

This is a useful instruction for working with any afflictive experience, holding it in a vast consciousness or spacious awareness so that the afflictive moment is barely a blip on the radar. That's possible, with steady, skillful practice over time.

And it's true, that when our mindfulness is steady enough, and our compassion for what is arising in our awareness in the moment is steady enough, we can hold and process and let go of whatever gets stirred up again and again from the mucky bottoms of our psyches, even toxic shame.

With enough trust in the goodness of our own true nature, we can be in a state of mind where any yuck at all is duly noted and recorded but doesn't have to hijack us into an old swirl of self doubt or self recrimination. Held and soothed in an embrace of a deep compassion and acceptance, shame becomes just another implicit memory of body sensations and affects coursing through the body-brain, barely a blip on the radar, and, perhaps, even with useful lessons to teach us.

So, how do we get stuck in a contracted shame response, and then how do we get unstuck?

It's the nature of how our brains work, that any experience at all causes neurons in the brain to fire; repeated experiences cause neurons to fire repeatedly, neurons that repeatedly fire together wire together. Experiences over time create the neural pathways and circuits that create our expectations of experience and our habitual responses to experience. Our experiences even shape the brain structure that can create – and change – those pathways. This conditioning is true for positive or negative patterns, the same process conditions both, the same soil grows either strawberries or poison oak.

As a human species, we are hardwired to connect, to attach, to belong. To instinctively reach out to others for safety and protection, to be seen, understood and accepted. Those yearnings are met with responses, the yearning and responses are paired in the neural circuitry and become our habitual patterns of expectation; when I reach out, this will happen. If our expectations about reaching out are positive – great! We feel secure, safe, loved, and lovable.

So there can be a positive experience of shame – self-righting shame. As a human species we use that hardwiring to socialize us into behaviors that keep us within the norms of the tribe and ostracize us from the tribe if we don't behave. Self-righting is what keeps us in the tribe when we're late to a meeting or our cell phones go off and we feel the chagrin. We apologize. Our submissive response keeps us engaged with others. Others accept our apology; we're only human. That keeps us regulated within the social norms of group and within the window of tolerance of our nervous system.

Shame begins to be toxic when the innate yearning to connect and belong, and the innate yearning to be seen, to be big, to be masterful, are not met positively. They are ignored, dismissed, rejected, when we are shamed, criticized, judged, humiliated for those longings. As a colleague of mine said recently, "Our innocent exuberance is slammed in mid-pirouette." Our activation to reach out and engage immediately contracts; we withdraw, shut-down, hide. Our yearnings are paired with pain, literally heart ache or heart break. Toxic shame curls the once hopeful - now wounded - child inside up into a

ball of pain and hurt, hiding in a defensive, isolating cave protecting ourselves as best we can against further rejection and humiliation.

We experience this as a collapse of the body, the chest caves inward. The head goes down; the eyes avert. We feel embarrassed or rejected. We hear the critical punishing thoughts in our mind – “You’re so stupid! How could you be so stupid? No one will ever love you; you don’t deserve to be loved.”

It’s painful to evoke this! That critical voice inside, by the way, is now seen in contemporary psychology as our own psyche’s best effort to protect ourselves from further shame. “If I, the inner critic or judge, can keep you in hiding so you don’t do anything else stupid to evoke an attack by “them”, you won’t be hurt again. I will do my job and do it quickly before anything bad can happen so “they” won’t do it worse.” This inner berating of self is a very fast intra-psychic mechanism to keep us belonging within the norms of the group (or attachment figure). Of course, this sends what we call the wounded inner child into exile, feeling lonely, isolated, orphaned.

It takes regulation and repair by self and other - I’m feeling OK it’s safe to feel OK; I’m not wrong or bad - to come back out into conscious, compassionate connection.

3. Pathogenic shame: When shaming is repeated and not repaired, if there’s not the sense from a parent or a partner or a mentor or a friend of I love you; you’re lovable; you’re amazing; it’s your behavior we have to address so you can stay in the tribe and not be in exile, if that doesn’t happen, the expectation of shaming begins to build a negative recursive loop in the neural circuitry, negative internal working models, so we learn what to do or not do to not trigger shaming from that person again.

Some of those coping mechanisms may be very adaptive if we have good boundaries and it’s safe to enforce them, but in earliest attachment relationships, that’s not always possible. Regulation mechanisms are not mature enough in us yet, or won’t work, or it’s not safe to work, with that person. The growing child becomes vulnerable to perceiving everything through a shame filter, even when it’s not intended that way.

So coping mechanisms can become adaptive for survival but constrict, block, de-rail what would be adaptive for growth. Those coping mechanisms become repeated and repeated, reinforcing themselves, strengthening those synaptic connections until they become pathogenic, meaning a rigidity in the neural circuitry that blocks learning from any new input. Even with accomplishments, even with blessings, there is that place in us where no mirroring, no empathy, no positive emotions, no resourcing of goodness can penetrate and heal. We become imprisoned in this negative recursive loop.

Tara Brach, in her book *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*, calls this loop the “trance of unworthiness”. Another colleague of mine calls it “the abyss of deficiency.” Bonnie Badenoch, in *Being a Brain Wise Therapist*, calls it “tragic recursive patterns encased in neural cement.”

This neural cement shows up in our metta practice when we can offer loving kindness for a benefactor, a dear friend, a neutral person, even a difficult person, and still have trouble feeling love and compassion for ourselves, or certain parts of ourselves. It's hard to trust that we deserve to be happy, safe from inner and outer harm, free from suffering and the causes of suffering, that we can truly be liberated from this cause of suffering.

Well, yes, we can. Here's how.

1. Re-sourcing

The first step, even before mindfulness, is resourcing. Which we can experience as re-sourcing. Sylvia speaks to this in her book *Happiness is an Inside Job*. It's her practice to make sure she has a sense of being held, by the Buddha, by the dharma, by the sangha, before she opens her mind to awareness and acceptance of whatever is arising in the moment. Rick Hanson, who taught here two Sundays ago on the "Hard Things That Open the Heart", reminds us that when the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree determined to not get up again until he reached enlightenment, the tree was at his back. He was able to face all the temptations and all the demons of Mara because his back was protected. To feel safe opening our minds and hearts wide open to awareness of anything arising, we need to feel someone has our back.

There is a meditation practice from the Tibetan tradition that helps us do this. I learned it from *Awakening Through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness* by John Makransky. If you will experiment with this with me.

Place your hand on your heart. The warmth and touch of your hand will activate a calming response in the parasympathetic nervous system and slow down your heart rate. Breathe gently and deeply into your heart center. This will further activate the calming response of the PNS. Breathe into your heart center any sense of goodness, safety, trust, acceptance, ease, you can muster. Once that's steady, call to mind a moment of being with someone who loves you unconditionally, someone you feel completely safe with. This may not always be a partner or a parent or a child. Those relationships can be so complex and the feelings mixed. This may be a good friend, a trusted teacher. It may be your grandmother, a third grade teacher, a beloved pet. Pets are great.

As you remember feeling safe and loved with this person or pet, see if you can feel the feeling that comes up with that memory in your body. Really savor this feeling of warmth, safety, trust, love in your body. What then feeling is steady, let go of the image and simply bathe in the feeling for 30 seconds.

There's a back story of why this works. The physical heart has neural cells. The heart itself can remember sensations of heart ache and heart break. The hand on the heart and the deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system and calms us down. The PNS is how we come to a deep sense of calm and peace when we meditate. Evoking the image of feeling safe and loved activates the release of oxytocin in the brain. Oxytocin is the hormone of safety and trust, of calm and connect. Oxytocin acts an

immediate antidote to cortisol, the hormone of the stress response. Oxytocin immediately quells the stress response of fight-flight-freeze. Frankly, oxytocin is one the best resources we have to recover from the effects of toxic shame and to support mindfulness practice, and we activate it by feeling being loved. I suggest doing the one-minute hand on heart exercise 5 times a day. It will actually begin to heal the heart and re-wire the brain.

2. Regulating

The second step is regulating. Even before we face the toxicity of shame directly, we use the first foundation of mindfulness -- mindfulness of the body -- to train the mind to experience and hold all experience without reactivity. All trauma memories, including the trauma of shame, are stored implicitly, unconsciously, in body memory as body sensation, posture, movement. Focusing attention on body sensations, especially neutral or positive body sensations, like the touch of clothing on the skin or the warmth of the hand on the heart, trains mind to hold experience equanimously, without reactivity, without judgment. Perhaps we were practicing this already in our morning sitting.

And we use the second foundation of mindfulness -- mindfulness of feeling tone, the initial response to any experience as positive, negative, neutral, that is not yet about content. The amygdala, the part of the limbic system of the brain that assesses for safety/danger 24/7, also assigns an emotional valence – positive-negative-neutral -- to any experience. If we can catch the emotional valence or feeling tone of our responses before any story or belief system arises, we can let it go or intentionally shift it, and short circuit a full blown shame attack.

The third foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and naming them as thoughts, feelings beliefs. When we notice what's happening and when we name what's happening, this is fear again, or this is anger again, or this is my story that I'm not good enough again, here's one part of me being disgusted and critical of another part of me again. The noticing and naming keeps the frontal lobes of the higher brain firing, the part of the brain that knows what's what and decreases the firing of the amygdala the part of the brain that sends us into alarm or shame.

Mindfulness is the primary tool we have to stay in what psychologists call the window of tolerance – the Buddhist term is equanimity. With equanimity, we can be present, aware, accepting, go with the flow, roll with the punches, embrace experience as it is. If we're too anxious, too hyper aroused, we go up out of window of tolerance; if we're too ashamed, too shut down, collapse down out of window of tolerance. Mindfulness -- awareness and acceptance -- keeps us in the window of tolerance, in the middle way of equanimity.

Let's sit for a moment, practicing settling into an open, spacious awareness of experience in the moment, no reactivity, no judgment. Just allowing and accepting, oh, this is what is. . If it's helpful, naming what is without going into story, this is hearing, this is

boredom, this is worrying. If there is judgment or reactivity, just naming that and holding it spaciously with awareness and acceptance.

3. Experience held in compassion, self-compassion, self-empathy

From here, step 3, we can hold any experience that arises with compassion. Including moments of shame of feeling unlovable, unworthy, undeserving. It is the mindfulness and the empathy that does the holding.

I have a sidebar here of what we are holding when we are holding an experience of shame. 85% of the time we are holding an implicit memory of shame. Our brain stores 80-90% of all our experience in implicit memory, outside of conscious awareness. It's nature's way of being efficient. When we remember something from implicit memory, it can feel very real, very true in the moment. All the feelings, thoughts, body sensations, are there with no sense whatsoever that what we are experiencing is a memory. Almost all shame experiences are entirely based in implicit memory; it just doesn't feel like a memory; it feels real right now.

So, we are triggered into implicit memory of shame. The third step is to hold the contraction, the collapse, the "I'm awful" or what's really true is nobody loves and nobody ever will – we hold all of that with compassion, how painful it is that that memory of the experience of shame is here again. Compassion hold the experience, compassion holds the personal self that is having that experiences. "Oh, this is so bad; this is so awful, so painful. And I love you through every bit of it." Sometimes when we try to offer compassion for ourselves, loving kindness to ourselves, we can bump into the beliefs and blocks that would keep out that loving kindness and compassion, and then we can have compassion for that.

We'll do an exercise to evoke compassion for that wounded part of ourselves that feels so much pain from shame. Because self-empathy, self compassion are the pre-requisite for rewiring the brain about shame.

Sit quietly. Bring to mind someone you love, someone you can unreservedly, unconditionally love. This could be a benefactor, a dear friend, a beloved child or a beloved pet. Feel the love you feel for them in your body. Sense the flow of love from you to them. Then, when that's steady, simply slip yourself into that flow. Keep the love and compassion going, and let it flow to yourself. If you can, let yourself receive the love and compassion, receiving the care. Feeling loved and cared for by your larger self.

There's no sure fire research yet about how many times we need to repeat this practice for the brain to rewire the synaptic connections so that compassion becomes the default response for relational injury. But Richie Davidson's lab at the University of Wisconsin has run adept monks through the fMRI scanner as they practice mindfulness and compassion. Both mindfulness and compassion strengthen the structures of the brain we

use for mindfulness and empathy; it's measurable in the increased volume of brain cells in those brain structures.

4. Reflection.

The fourth step is reflection. Reflection is the experience of mindfulness you're familiar with. When we step back from the experience of the moment and observe it without judgment, we can hold the experience as one experience in a larger perspective. You've probably experienced this with many experiences other than shame. I feel angry right now but I wasn't angry ten minutes ago. I feel sadness in this moment, but I don't feel sad all the time. We can begin to work with shame in the same way. This state feels completely awful and I do feel it a lot of the time, definitely in certain circumstance or with certain people, but shame is not the only state of being I have; it is only one of many and when I can see clearly, I can see that this experience is only one experience of many.

Take a moment to remember moment of anger; then remember moment of sadness. Then a moment of joy, remember a moment of feeling unlovable, remember moment of feeling loved, remember moment of calm contentment. Notice that you have shifted states. Focus your awareness on the Awareness that holds all of these states as they shift.

5. Re-pairing.

The fifth step is repairing the shame memory, which we can think of as re-pairing. Given neural plasticity – the capacity of our brains to grow new neurons and new synaptic connections lifelong – re-pairing is the moment of brain change. We pro-actively re-pair the old shame memory with new experiences of self empathy, self compassion. We evoke the old experience or memory of shame; that lights up the firing of those neural networks. We cultivate self-empathy, self-compassion, those neural networks are firing. These two neural nets of experience begin firing together at the same time. They wire together, and new circuitry is created in that moment, sometimes quite dramatically. The sense of shame literally dissolves in the larger awareness and compassion, like the teaspoon of salt in the lake. No more charge. No big deal. We may have to practice this over and over if we have a ton of salt to dissolve, but this is how it works.

We'll do a practice exercise. Again place your hand on your heart and breathe deeply. Evoke a memory of being loved; when that is steady, evoke a small version of an old memory, a teaspoon, not a ton, hold that memory in the larger awareness, the larger acceptance. It's OK. I'm really OK. The larger view from the goodness of our true nature holds the smaller view; we can sometimes even feel a felt sense of shift in our bodies.

We can also pre-wire or "prime" the brain to anticipate and deflect a shame attack by cultivating a steady sense of mindful empathy and compassion for our experiences before an implicit memory of shame is triggered by someone. This is an especially good practice for family visits on the holidays.

Dyads to discuss or journal to reflect

Take five minutes to reflect on the learning from the exercises in this morning's talk. Either share your experiences in a dialogue with someone in the class this morning, or take time to write your experiences in your journal. The meta-reflection helps the brain take in and integrate the experience.

From here, set the intention to cultivate the mindful awareness and acceptance that embraces all moments of experience, seeing clearly with an open and loving heart.

May all beings

Heal and awaken

Into the love and awareness

That holds and honors

The fullness of being.

- Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance*