

Centering Meditation

Arrive; be here in the fullness that you are. As you settle into an awareness of presence in this moment, notice all the many things you are carrying from the day, the week, or your life. Let them be here, held in the compassionate benevolence of your practice, of this sangha, in your larger awareness and larger perspective. Let them be here; honor them as part of your being in this moment. Let them be here, let them move through, let them go.

Invite in any sense of goodness, kindness, gratitude that would support you in your well-being as you settle into a gentle awareness of being here in your body; focusing on your breathing; resting in the awareness holding any experience arising in this moment; letting it go, as we sit together for five minutes.

Dharma Talk: Letting Go

In the book and in the live class, James identified practices of letting go of stuff, letting go of busy, over-crowded schedules, letting go of expectations that can set us up for disappointment and suffering if we rigidly cling to them, and letting go of stories, beliefs, identities, habits of responding, from our childhood, from anywhere in our past, that may no longer serve us. And we will explore all of that tonight. But I had my own instructive experience in letting go this morning.

Yesterday, parking my car in Golden Gate Park, which is what I do when I work in my San Francisco office, I heard cries, I saw a crow high up above, realized it had snatched a chick that was crying, crying, crying. And all of it, life, death, nothing, nothing I could do, how to keep my heart open to the innocent life that had been snatched and was going to die, iconic of all the innocent lives snatched. I was troubled last night, realizing I know so many people now who are facing life and death issues, a friend's brother died last week of pancreatic cancer, the neighbor across the street is in the hospital for congestive heart failure. My own brother, whom I had that sweet reunion with in mid-June, still faces multiple health issues; his life goes on moment by moment. My godson Elijah, whom I saw the fireworks with on Fourth of July, after a week in summer camp run by UCSF for kids with IBD, and after months on prednisone, he seems to be in partial remission still ongoing letting go to face. I was overtaken by the realization that what we're really asked to let go of is self and ultimately life. How do we find joy in that? I realized our practice of letting go had to accommodate all of that or our practice wasn't worth a damn. We have to be able to address our fear of letting go....and, I had this evening's talk all prepared, ready to edit on computer and print out homework this morning, and realized I would have to go much deeper in my dharma talk than I had prepared.

This morning, sweet sense of refuge in the present moment, in resting in, anchoring in True Nature, in finding refuge in Buddha Dharma Sangha. From there, I could approach

the challenge of exploring letting go of self, letting go of life. Re-wrote talk, keep what I had originally written in the exercises. Discovering, when anchored in refuge of Buddha Dharma Sangha, we can let go.

So tonight, we'll explore the process of letting go – whether the objects or experiences we are letting go of are stuff, busy overcrowded schedules, expectations-plans-hoped for outcomes, letting go of stories, beliefs, identities, habits from the past that no longer serve us. All of that is essential to a liberation from suffering so that we can experience, embody, and express joy.

Exploring a process like letting go is like exploring a process like mindfulness. M is a practice of focusing attention on experiences in the moment, without judgment, or clinging, or aversion, whether that experience is the breath, or a backache, or a heartache, or a role we play in our lives, or an identity we've come to be happy with or unhappy with. We practice M so we can see clearly and make wise choices.

We practice letting go so we can create an openness, a spaciousness, where the necessities and relationships and events of our lives can flow, as they do, in a stream of life and death and gain and loss, so that we can become aligned with the natural, way-larger-than-us arising and falling away of all things of existence. So that's why we'll explore letting go of the collection and integration of those patterns we call self, and the process of selfing, and explore letting go of our fear of letting go of our precious mortal lives. So we are becoming adept at letting in, letting be, letting go, of all the phenomena of being human.

I realize profoundly in order to do that, in order to be able to let go, of personal stuff, personal needs, personal stories, personal self, personal life, we must be anchored in something much larger than ourselves. Many names for this experience, consciousness, awareness, unconditioned, essence, divine, emptiness, no-thing-ness. All the same phenomena. I use being-ness. Spirit Rock teachers use True Nature or Buddha Nature to attempt to put words to the experience that everything is OK, everything is perfect, whole and complete, as it is. Tibetan ripga great perfection. That nothing is missing or wrong.

Cultivating that sense of being-ness, of being in alignment with that being-ness, is a lifelong practice. I have been practicing waking up in the morning and not getting out of bed until I feel settled in that sense of well-being of being-ness, every morning for five years now.

The experience is very similar to what we can experience in the human realm as a sense of love, connection, belonging, the secure attachment a baby feels innocently sleeping in its parent's arms. The safety and trust we can feel in a beloved's arms. It's the oxytocin flowing that creates that sense of safety, trust, ease, well being. According to Dacher Keltner at UC Berkeley, it's the same oxytocin we can feel in a sense of blissful devotion or surrender to the sacred, the divine.

I want us to simply spend a few moments in that sense of ease, well-being, True Nature before we explore letting go of anything, because it is that sense of anchoring that makes it possible to let go of self, of life, and that guides us in terms of letting go of the day to day stuff, activities, plans, expectations.

Experiential Exercise #1: Anchoring in True Nature

So...taking a moment to settle into a quite peaceful state.

Sit quietly and comfortably. Be aware of sitting in the chair or couch. Become aware of anchoring the weight of your body in your pelvic floor, grounded, centered. Be aware of your feet on the floor, anchoring you to the stability of the earth. Feel solid, substantive, in your hips, legs, feet. Bring your awareness to your spine rising long and tall and strong. From the strength of your body and back, focus your awareness on the softness of your belly, your heart center, your throat. Relax any tension in your jaw, in your eyes. Focus your awareness on your breathing, gently in and out, life energy flowing gently in and out.

Breathe in to your heart center a deep sense of goodness of safety and trust, of ease and well-being, what Tara Brach calls loving presence. Take refuge in the Buddha Dharma the Sangha is that resonates for you. Taking refuge in Quan Yin, the presence of infinite acceptance and love, is what works for me. Rest in a spacious calm in the larger awareness and compassion that holds everything, every moment of experience of being in form with a sense of OKness.

I want to do exercises after the break to explore the concreteness of letting go of stuff, of busy, over-crowded schedules, of expectations, plans, hoped for outcomes. In the dharma talk I want to explore a process of letting go of stories and identities, letting go of self and selfing, letting go of life.

In the book and in the course, James focuses on mindfulness as the primary tool of letting go. Of course, there is no tool more powerful than mindfulness to see clearly and allow awareness, with compassion for the depth of our conditioning, to hold a previously held belief or habit and see it as a habitual belief or story or identity and then create the space to respond differently, wisely, and let it go. We practiced that last month in S.O.B.E.R.

In the book and in the course, James offers the tool “What story am I believing now?” It’s excellent. I use it all the time. The question helps us pause and reflect and disentangle, dis-identify with the story. The same question can be asked with great benefit “What emotional state am I in right now?” Or “what mental state am I in right now.” Because our emotions and mental states are also habits that we can use our mindfulness and compassion to help ourselves let go of.

James points out that 95% of the thoughts we think we have thought before, and 80% of those are negative. It is wise Effort to be able to let go of them. And he has his suggested list in the book: letting go ingrained ideas of having to say or do something

perfectly. Letting go of a certain kind of friendship with our children as they go off to college and want less interaction with us. Letting go of our independence and self-sufficiency due to physical injury or aging. Letting go of the fear of being abandoned by a partner who is actually very steady; letting go of the need to be right.

We can use the mindfulness generated by the question of “What story am I believing now?” to open up a process of inquiry before letting go. The psychotherapy modality of Internal Family Systems has a practice of inquiry called Triggers become Trailheads; so we can use our awareness of a trigger to begin to explore a trailhead of learning and insight.

These are excellent uses of mindfulness – self-directed neuroplasticity - to help us become aware of what habits of thought, emotional reactions, physical states, mental states, belief systems, views of self we are caught in and to create more response flexibility so we can let go.

But as James acknowledges, some of these thoughts, identities, belief systems, are rooted in early experiences in life, even in childhood, and baggage from childhood is sometimes very hard to let go of. It doesn't just disappear just because we tell it to, any more than our children want to go to bed when we tell them to.

So we need tools and practices to help the letting go actually work. So I want to go deeper than cognitive tools, because what drives most stories we are caught in comes from a deeper part of our brain than the cortex which does have the amazing capacities to make stories and to make sense of our experience and to create a coherent narrative out of them.

The roots of our stories and beliefs and views are the earliest experiences we have in relationships - around our bodily and emotional states, around safety-danger, connection-disconnection, engagement-separation - that shape our view of who I am and what must I do to be accepted and loved by you. I know some traditional Buddhist teachings say our thoughts create our reality, and certainly our habits of thoughts shape our habitual responses to reality, but those thoughts developed later in the developing brain than the visceral physical emotional impulses that need a story to explain them and a map to navigate them.

I had a chance at the break in the live class last year to ask the guest speaker M.J. Ryan about the relational tools of presence, connection, empathy to help us let go of or to actually change and transform our stories our beliefs to more wholesome ones and she immediately agreed - absolutely. The whole focus on mindful empathy that Dan Siegel writes about in *Mindsight*, which James mentioned in this month's practice letter, to strengthen the part of our brain, the pre-frontal cortex, that allows us to let go. That was a relief.

And, we're learning more and more every day from the neuroscience that it actually is the lighting up of the entire neural network of a story – the visual images, the emotions, the

body sensation, which are processed in right hemisphere mode, with thoughts about our selves now in relationship to that memory, which is left hemisphere mode of processing, and re-pairing that lit up negative network with a lit up positive network – so lit up means not just thinking about it but sensing it, feeling it, and feeling held enough in empathic connections that it's safe to feel it, that re-wires it. re-pairing the negative story with a more positive story, a negative memory of an experience or emotion with a more positive experience, emotion or memory. When the story is re-wired we can let it go, not in the sense of being rejected or denied or forgotten, but letting go in the sense of its power over us; it has been allowed, accepted, absorbed, integrated into our ongoing story of our self, part of us but no longer driving the bus.

So this is not just a cognitive I'll trade this thought for that thought. Actually, mindfulness and compassion or empathy are always in the background of this neural deconsolidation-reconsolidation mechanism. If we hold a negative thought or story or view with enough mindfulness, we do see clearly enough to penetrate its substantiveness into the coming and going that it is. James says "Thoughts are as real as I believe them to be, but as empty as I perceive them to be". The no-thing-ness that constantly shapes and reshapes itself into a new constellation, a new pattern.

And it's the compassion, the kindness toward ourselves for how hard it is to be a human being that becomes the larger felt container that can hold any sorrow, any shame, any fear, or anger and any story about the sorrow and shame and fear and anger in a comforting "there, there, it's OK, you're OK, everything is going to be OK. Because that mindfulness and compassion taps into our True Nature that is OK and that is much larger than any moment, or year, of pain, grief, rage, lust, hatred, etc and can have self-empathy for it. We've done the exercise about this re-pairing and re-wiring before. Mindfulness – applied mindfulness, self-directed neuroplasticity. We'll do one again tonight because this is the fundamental neural mechanism (consolidation-deconsolidation-reconsolidation) in our brain that underlies letting go.

We'll first do an exercise in letting in or tapping into our True Nature because I think whenever we are anchored in a sense of our True Nature it is a lot easier to let in, let be, let go of anything that isn't in alignment with it. There's more and more evidence that when we do a strong compassion practice or gratitude practice or joy practice, we shift the processing that's going on in our brains from the RH which has a negativity bias from messages from the body and limbic system toward vulnerability to anxiety, shame, depression, withdrawal, to LH not the thinking analyzing part but the part that can be more open to experience, more accepting, more naming thus more integrating.

Experiential Exercise #2: Letting Go of Old Patterns

There's a teaching story in the Buddhist tradition. If you dissolve a teaspoon of salt in a glass of water, and then try to take a sip of the water – Ick! The water is too salty to drink. If you dissolve a teaspoon of salt in a large freshwater lake, and then dip the glass in the lake and take a sip of water from the glass, all is fine. You can't taste the salt at all.

1. Identify one small old belief ready and willing to let go of. Identify the feeling state. Name this experience as the target we'll work with.

2. Bring up very positive state of mind, state of being, state of well-being of True Nature. You can evoke this with a sense of loving kindness toward yourself; a sense of gratitude and appreciation for life; a sense of love and acceptance for someone near to you and easy to open your heart to. And let yourself sense where you feel this well-being in your body. What the full sense of it is where.

3. Into that spacious positive state, bring small pattern you are ready and willing to let go of, hold the larger awareness of well-being, feeling where you feel that well-being in your body; feeling sense of pattern, light up visual image, emotions, where in body, thoughts of self, hold both larger and smaller. I'll ask you three times to keep breathing, notice what you are aware of, how the larger sense of well-being and holds the smaller negative memory. What are you aware of, do three times. Keep breathing.

From here, we practice letting go of any particular pattern. Phil Moffett identified his list in the live course this month: letting go of judging, of comparing, of fixing. When it's safe enough, when we feel anchored in True Nature enough, can suddenly, radically let go of all of the habits, all the beliefs, all of the accumulated constellated stories that integrate into the coherent narrative of experience we call self. What we do when we let go of self one pattern at a time is re-conditioning our conditioning. What we do when we suddenly drop through all the layers of stories and conditioning to the Unconditioned is de-conditioning. And it can happen pretty regularly on retreat. Sitting quietly, following the breath, letting go of all sensations, images, feelings, thoughts as they arise, all the mental contents, and drop into a sense of peace and ease that feels empty of anything, and full of the presence that holds everything.

What happens in the brain is we seem to hold our sense of story of ego functioning of "I" here in the medial frontal lobes of the cortex; this is where we organize our sense of self moment by moment by moment. And that is a great accomplishment of a mature brain to do that. When we let go of organizing sense of self, consciousness seems to reside out here in the temporal parietal lobes of the cortex where we process a sense of space and time. And when that processing slows things down enough and opens things up enough; we're safe in the refuge of the Buddha Dharma Sangha and we don't have to keep it all together we can let go into a sense of spaciousness and vastness of consciousness. Expand our awareness out infinitely, eternally.

Experiential Exercise #3: Letting Go into Spacious Awareness

Sit quietly; allow your awareness to rest on your breathing, gently in and out. Notice any sense of goodness and ease. As you are aware of your breathing, expand your awareness to your whole body breathing. Then become aware of the breathing of all the bodies in this room, the breathe of life. Staying anchored in your awareness of your own breathing, become aware of breathing beyond this room, other people in your life you

know, not physically here in this moment; they are there. Staying anchored in your own breathing, become aware of people you don't know beyond this room beyond this street, or neighborhood, city or county, all of life breathing, anchoring in your own breathing, expanding awareness as spaciously as you comfortable can to all beings breathing all over the plane, even awareness of awareness beyond this planet. Let yourself rest comfortably in this expanded consciousness.

And then become aware again of your own breathing, sitting in this room, in your body.

As we move toward letting go completely I realize the key to letting go is letting go of the fear of losing, the fear of having to let go. If we can let go of the fear, we can let go.

Rather dramatic experience of this for me – after daylong at SRMC with James, Rick and Rick on refuge in practice when the brain itself is letting go. If we re experience Alzheimer's or stroke or Parkinson's or Multiple Sclerosis. How do we find refuge in mindfulness when we are losing our mind? Beautiful stories all day long of people who did find refuge in loving kindness and compassion practice, equanimity practice. Themselves or as caregivers. That night I went into a very dark difficult place because my dad had Alzheimer's before he died and this is a genetic risk factor. I'm growing older and forgetting this and not thinking as clearly or quickly sometimes. And I had to find refuge in something deeper that would be OK if my mind went. A place of refuge in the heart, in love and connection, and by the time I had a chance to talk with James about it, I knew I would be OK. Losing the fear of losing my mind was key. I do everything I can to keep my beautiful mind intact, I exercise and think and create and learn and engage with people to keep the neurons integrated, but there is a peace I hadn't know before I found that refuge of the heart.

Segue into losing fear of dying, finding peace larger than any gain or loss. Ten years ago or so, Stephen Levine wrote a beautiful book on A Year to Live (in your resources page) and Bonnie Jonsson led a Year To Live group at Spirit Rock. I was in that group. We continued meeting for 8 years. The book offers a year's worth of exercises and meditations to pretend that you know you're going to die in a year. You know you have one year to live and how can you use that year to prepare to let go.

Doing a life review of the life we have up until now. Exercise in letting go of plans, of stuff, finishing up unfinished business and saying I love you to people you love. Exercise of writing your will, visiting a cemetery, writing your own epitaph. Exercise of letting go of fear, letting go of the body. Meditations on dying. In the group we had a ritual of making clay figures that represented us, saying goodbye to ourselves as we had known us, throwing the clay figures into the ocean and going into silence until the next morning. Doing a ritual in the morning of re-birth into a new life. And every single person changed their life profoundly. We don't have to wait until we become ill or someone we love becomes ill to live wisely now.

Experiential Exercise #4: Letting Go of What's Important

This is an exercise I learned from Frank Ostaseski, founder of the Zen Hospice Project. On 16 different pieces of paper, write down the names of four people important to you, each one on a separate piece of paper; write down four roles (sister, boss, neighbor) important to you, each one on a separate piece of paper; write down four activities (bowling, cooking, playing the piano) important to you, each one on a separate piece of paper; write down four possessions important to you, each one on a separate piece of paper.

If you hold all 16 pieces of paper as though you were fanning out a deck of cards, I will come around and take several different pieces of paper, randomly, from each of you. Notice, notice your reactions as you realize what you have lost. Simply notice and hold – which losses are harder than you expected? Which losses are less problematic than you expected?

How does all of this apply to Deepening Joy? I think more skills, less fear, creates the conditions for joy, peacefulness, ease, to arise.

Closing Meditation

May our sincere efforts to practice letting go bring us to a sense of spaciousness and enough-ness; may our practice of letting go bring us deeper joy, and touch the lives of those around us.

Homework for Letting Go

1. Homework to let go of stuff

The point of this exercise is to open up space in your life so something new can emerge. As always, alignment with our True Nature is what guides our choices, our wise efforts. It's very helpful to do this exercise with a buddy, to give you a larger or alternative perspective on love letters from your boyfriend/girlfriend in college or dishes you've inherited from a great aunt.

- a. First get a clear sense of your values, your priorities, your commitments now. And a clear sense of your own True Nature – spacious, stable, and flowing.
- b. Experiment with changing your perspectives on stuff. Rather than de-cluttering by geographical area – living room, dining room, bedroom, kitchen, office, etc.- think of function – socializing, sanctuary, infrastructure (pay bills), food prep, food consumption, food clean-up. “Stuff” might wind up in different categories.
- c. Choose one drawer or one cabinet or one shelf where you feel you can sort things out by your current values and priorities and let go of whatever doesn't fit, align, serve anymore.

- d. Allow ten minutes for this exercise. This practice is not meant to clean out your entire house or garage overnight. It's to let you have the experience that you can let go of stuff.
- e. Take everything out of one drawer or one cabinet or one shelf and spread it out on the floor where you can see it all at once.
- f. Sort everything into one of four piles:
- 1) serving a current purpose, used every day or week enough in a month to keep it is easy access. Will be put back.
 - 2) Memories, stories, tradition, heritage connected with it. Wanting to save for now in the archives. Usually a different space for storage, not use
 - 3) Undecided – don't spend a lot of time in ambivalence. Put to one side, perhaps in the back of the cabinet. If you don't use it in six months, it goes in pile to forward or delete next time
 - 4) Forward: into sub-groups: recycle through swap party with friends or through recycling. Donate to goodwill, Ritter, House, library, SCRAP, etc.
 - 5) Delete – to the trash
- g. Celebrate the new spaciousness, the new confidence in the process.

2. Homework to let go of a busy, overcrowded schedule

This is not just letting go of busyness but letting in space to ponder the busyness.

- a. Schedule 20 minutes of meditation time every day for this month. (If you're too busy to do this, you're too busy!) Use the time to allow your mind to become quiet and spacious. Create a space in your mind that will allow to assess the rest of your schedule from the point of view of what's in alignment with True Nature and what isn't.
- b. Make a list of 20 or 30 activities you do regularly during a week or month. For each activity, check one of these boxes:
- 1) in alignment with True Nature, this is a manifestation of your spiritual path, Whether it's family time, creative work, community service, financial stability, health and recreation-restoration; trivial imperatives to keep the ship afloat until you change ships. The activity is in alignment and is worth keeping
 - 2) Should's – patterns fed by unconscious expectations, yours or other people's. Deciding which of those are in alignment with True Nature and worth keeping, which are not.
 - 3) Escape into denial or distraction rather than entertainment, education, enlightenment. Many activities can be used either for wholesome wise effort or for unwholesome escape, the same activity; we have to discern which way we are using it.
 - 4) destructive, de-railing addictions or behaviors out of integrity. These are good to let go of, using the methods of re-pairing or replacing with something more positive.

d. Identify one “should” you are willing and able to get go of this month.

3. Homework to let go of expectations

There is skillful rehearsing of behaviors, visualizing wished for outcomes, priming the brain to respond skillfully. That is all wise effort. Letting go of expectations as James means it is letting go of outcome. We show up in a responsible way, and we let go of controlling life’s unfolding.

- a. Make a list of 5-6 expectations you do have.
- b. For each, imagine what you hope for or plan for not happening as you hope or plan. Imagine how you can let go of any disappointment or contention about the outcome; opening to life lessons and new possibilities.
- c. Imagine new alternative plans or possibilities for each unfulfilled expectation, and imagine letting go of controlling the outcome.

4. Homework for Letting go of stories

M.J. told a story in the live class last year of a different way to work with stories. A client of hers was quite distraught because her husband was away on a business trip in Colombia, South America, and hadn’t called her for three days. The client was sure her husband was having an affair. M.J. had her brainstorm 6 possible alternative explanations for the lack of phone call: her husband lost his phone, the area he was in didn’t have cell phone service, he had been murdered (!) – an alternative!, he had called but the voice mail deleted the message; he was truly tied up in meetings and the time change was unworkable., etc. The client had a chance to dis-embed from her story and see it as a story. Turns out, indeed, his phone carrier had no service in the area he was working; he called as soon as he got to a large city.

- a. Identify a story you have to explain someone else’ behavior.
- b. Identify 6 plausible alternative explanations for their behavior.

Resources

www.storyofstuff.com

Amazing talk by Lee Lipsenthal, M.D. facing his own journey with dying:
<http://www.aafp.org/online/en/home/cme/aafpcourses/conferences/assembly/past-future/pastyears/2010/plenaries0.html>

The Fearless Heart: The Practice of Living with Courage and Compassion. Pema Chodron.

Suffering is Optional: Three Keys to Freedom and Joy. Cheri Huber

True Refuge: Three Gateways to a Fearless Heart. Tara Brach (forthcoming)

A Year to Live. Stephen Levine.

Year To Live groups led by Bonnie Jonsson www.livingmindfullynow.com.