

Boundaries

San Rafael Sitting Group

November 16, 2011

We've been focusing on mindfulness and relationships in this month of November while Rick is away traveling; he'll return here on November 30. We began with skillfully using people we're in relationship with as role models, refuges, and resources. Last week we expanded on the theme of Wise Speech to include Wise Presence, Wise Speech, Wise Listening and Wise Dialogue.

Tonight, I want to talk about boundaries, a topic that's extremely important when it comes to navigating relationships skillfully. Not boundaries in the sense of a wall or a protection, but in the sense of the interface between ourselves and another person. The field of energy where we connect and disconnect, engage and disengage.

Boundaries is not a topic to be found readily in the Pali canon. The Buddha taught about interconnectedness and the boundless, all natural to focus on in a tradition that teaches anatta or non-self as one of the three characteristics of existence. But the Buddha did require his followers to follow precepts that made life in a monastic community workable – wise speech, not taking that which is not freely offered, for his monks to be celibate, for householders to refrain from sexual inappropriateness. So there's certainly an awareness and a respect for ethics and guidelines to help us navigate the dynamics of inter-acting with other people, engaging, dis-engaging, allowing engagement or prohibiting engagement.

I want to anchor our exploration into boundaries tonight in equanimity. When we practice presence – as we've been doing here – anchoring in being present, open, calm, engaged as we interact with other people, and when we become mindful of what's happening between us and another person when we're interacting, or within us when we're interacting - and we do that by the ABC's of mindfulness – becoming Aware, Being with, and being with with Compassion – then we can see the need for equanimity.

Equanimity is one of the four Heavenly Abodes, along with loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy; indeed, equanimity is what makes the first three workable. Equanimity is the capacity to remain grounded in clear seeing and a willingness to remain open to the experiences of life, and relationships, without tipping into the hindrances of grasping, aversion, or delusion.

Rick has pointed out that equanimity is different than calm. When we're calm, as we are when we're present, there's no reactivity. With mindfulness, we can see any of our reactivity clearly. With equanimity, we practice having no reactivity to our reactivity. Equanimity is often taught in the Buddhist tradition as having no reactivity to any of the eight worldly conditions – gain and loss, praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain. With equanimity we can experience a steadiness of being engaged with experience, but not being embedded in our experience or hijacked by it.

We could practice equanimity with any of the common polarities of human experience: haste-leisure, intensity-boredom, mistrust-trust.

So, among the objects of mindfulness we can pay attention to in terms of relationships, and cultivate equanimity in terms of relationships are three states of being: we can be in a calm, relaxed state of openness and presence; we can be revved up to cope with some sense of alarm; we can be shut down, aversive to something unpleasant, scary or painful. Those three states – calm, revved up, shut down – are biologically hardwired in by evolution. The calm state is where we would like to live most of the time; it corresponds to equanimity, being relaxed yet engaged, calm yet alert, able to cope with the eight worldly conditions. With steady mindfulness practice, equanimity and the other three brahma viharas - loving kindness, compassion, joy, we do live there most of the time. Revved up is known in common terms as fight-flight – being revved up is what fuels both grasping and aversion, at least in terms of fighting to protect something we want or value, or active hatred and rejection. Shut down corresponds more to checking out, the confusion or delusion of numbing out, which is a more passive version of aversion.

If we apply these three states – calm, revved up, shut down - to the topic of boundaries, we can see that in a state of calm and equanimity, we can be open and engaged with the people around us, yet maintain a clear sense of boundary between their experience and our experience, between their needs and desires and our needs and desires. Hopefully, from a place of calm and equanimity, we can see clearly their belief systems, assumptions and projections, and our belief systems, assumptions and projections. We can perceive what's happening, observe our reactions or responses, even their reactions and responses, with a flexibility that keeps options open, not pre-determined or habitual. Calm presence and equanimity would allow us to perceive not only the other person's True Nature – the goodness of their innate Buddha Nature – but to perceive everything about them, exactly as it is, and maintain a stance of mindful compassion toward whatever we are seeing or experiencing.

So, we can notice mindfully, compassionately, with equanimity: I just blew my top, didn't I? I didn't mean to yell at my nephew; what's going on? Or I just hurt somebody's feelings...I forgot their name or I forget their mother died of cancer last year. My own personal favorite...I must have gotten triggered by something because I just left the party and walked outside and I'm halfway down the block and what am I doing here? We are Aware, Being with, with Compassion. The C could also be Curiosity. We could do a mindful compassionate inquiry and unpack and unpack, What am I doing here?

James Baraz teaches the mindfulness practice of What story am I believing now? We can also ask at any moment – what state of being am I in right now? Am I calm and relaxed? Am I revved up? Am I shut down?

We can check in about those states with mindfulness, compassionate curiosity and equanimity as we notice – what happens inside as we decide to reach out to someone, or hesitate to reach out to someone; noticing and being equanimous with what happens inside when someone reaches out to us. Noticing what happens when we feel we need to say no to someone (noticing all of our habits and reasons why). Noticing what happens when someone says no to us. All of these relational dynamics will evoke the shifts between calm presence and revved up and shut down states we want to be mindful of and not reactive to.

Here's an exercise to help us become mindful of these shifts. I learned the beginning of this exercise, at least, from Stuart Eisendrath who runs research programs at UCSF on Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for depression, and then I expanded on it. We'll move into our groups of four so we can de-brief with each other after the exercise; then I'll guide you through the exercise.

Sit comfortably; allow your eyes to gently close. Focus your awareness inward, notice the gentle in and out of your breathing, coming into a sense of presence: relaxed, calm, alert. When you're ready, imagine yourself walking down the sidewalk of a street in your town. You notice a friend walking toward you on the sidewalk on the other side of the street. You wave, but there's no response. Notice what happens inside of you in that moment of no response. Then, imagine that you say "Hello!" and imagine that your friend responds, however they do that. Notice what happens inside of you as you perceive their response. Then return your awareness to being present in this room.

De-Brief: You'll each have two minutes to share with your group what you noticed. What states of being might have been evoked by the exercises: calm, revved up or shut down. And could you notice any reactivity and hold that reactivity in awareness, compassionate curiosity, and equanimity.

Questions

Closing Meditation