

Avoidance and Presence

We are exploring the balance of head (wisdom, insight, panna) and heart (loving kindness, compassion and connection).

In looking at heart based practice, there are two sides to this:

- 1) Cultivating then open heart - we started with metta practice.
- 2) Noticing and attending to when the heart is closed.

Whenever you invoke something, the barriers or denying forces to it will also show up. Thus, we need include both sides of the heart: open and closed. If we do only one, the unseen, unacknowledged shadow side will eventually engulf us.

The practice is to meet this directly: noticing when the heart is closed. It's not considered a problem, but an opportunity to see more clearly and deeply.

It's so easy when we are feeling cut off, pissed off, or in a fearful state to see that as a part of ourselves we need to fix. It's easy to think we 'should' not be that way: to shut it down, pretend it's not there, deep six it, or beat ourselves up. But you can't cut off parts of yourself and be on the path to wholeness.

These wounded and crying places are, in their own way, trying to help, to keep 'me' safe and comfortable. It's just they have a limited set of skills and understanding. It's not unlike asking your toddler to drive you to the store. The toddler may do the best they can, but just don't have the skill set. There's a good chance you'll end up wrapped around a telephone pole, and it's not because the toddler is wrong or bad.

We have something in us that is larger, wiser, and more compassionate and skillful than our pain. From this ground, we accept, hold, and give space to the hurt places, allowing them to gradually unwind in the light of our larger spiritual understanding.

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At some point in the insight thread of this path, we realize that the ego identified mind, because it feels separated and afraid, results in a fairly continuous movement away from the present moment.

The seemingly separate self moves away from the moment because it is born of seeking. Seeking a different experience than the one you are having. Even if you are having a good experience, it is grasping, seeking to prolong that experience and thus still away from the moment. Seeking assumes that whatever you want is not already present, so it is a state of inherent suffering.

In many ways, staying deeply present is the secret door, the gate to waking up from the dream. Because when we stay present, we are outside of the small self. That which is able to be directly present with discomfort, contraction, or pain, is outside of the ego identified mind. Often, this is the only step that is needed.

HOLDING THE CLOSED HEART

The heart closes with resistance. It's the no, I don't want that - creating distance between 'me' and the 'feelings I don't want'.

Some words we found describing this resistance:

- refusal
- avoidance
- moving away from, withdrawal, shutting down
- denying of
- cutting or closing off
- numbing

Being present with is the opposite. Here's some words describing being present with:

- acceptance
- opening to
- allowing of
- listening to, reflection
- holding space for

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- embodied
- empathy and understanding
- curiosity

So what does it mean to be present with something?

We are accepting, listening and holding, but not indulging. It's important to understand the difference between presence and indulging and acting out.

To understand this clearly, let's look at all the ways we indulge and act out, so we will not confuse the patterns of resistance to listening to and holding with pain and discomfort.

AVOIDANCE PATTERNS

From last week's class review:

When we examine carefully an experience like being angry, we realize everything we think of as 'being angry' is actually an attempt to push it away and not feel it. Raising our voices, slamming a door, walking out, turning on the TV or scrolling to distract ourselves, becoming distant or numbing out are all ways of trying to discharge the energy, control, push away, not be with.

And the most significant of all is the way the voice in our head goes into action: complaining, rehearsing, judging, commenting, fixing, repetitive thoughts of all kinds - trying to make us a little bit more comfortable and justified.

What are some of the ways we avoid the present moment, or feeling our feelings:

- addictive behaviors: to numb out feeling
- denial: I am not feeling this
- ruminating / dwelling upon
- compartmentalization or buffering

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- distraction: doing things not because we want to do them, but in order to get away from something else. TV, scrolling, internet research
- self loathing
- avoiding, procrastinating
- mental outflow, the voice in our heads begins talking, commenting, judging, justifying
- fixing: making sure it never happens again

Do any of these feel satisfying, or heart opening?
All of this is the movement of suffering.

It seems counter intuitive, the way to be free of suffering is to do the opposite, to turn around and invite the feelings in.

We need to know our avoidance habits, so we can see them when they arise. We notice they are there, and come back to presence with.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

We did a meditation together to directly experience what presence with feels like and how it opens ways to movement.

Here are some general guidelines when doing this:

1) Embody it. Start by dropping into the awareness of the body. Then revisit the situation that triggered the pain or fear to arise.

Picture your surroundings. See the space around you. Who was there?

Were you sitting? Standing? Lying down? On the phone? At your desk? On your computer?

What time of day was it?

Recreate it as fully as possible through all the sense doors: seeing, hearing, touching.

2) Allow the painful feelings to arise again. A difficult feeling is a physical sensation in the body. Turn your attention to the body and find the felt sense of this feeling in the core spaces of the body. It could be a contraction in the chest, an uneasiness in the belly, a

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tightening in the jaw or the throat. Find it, and hold it. It's often helpful to put your hand over the area of felt sensation to keep your attention with it. Don't try to fix or change it. We simply listenr it out without condition.

3) Notice what avoidance behaviors come up. Do you want to do something else? Does the voice in the head start up? Do you feel tired and dispirited? Bored? Notice, but no need to fix or change. When the avoidance patterns arise, we see their presence, and simply do not feed them. The suttas advise us to abandon them. This is not pretending they are not present, or trying to beat them into submission, or fix them. We simply do not feed them.

4) Give the feeling all the space it needs.

Again, from last week's class review:

We don't 'fix' ourselves when we notice our energy is low and our hearts are closed. We become deeply present with the closing energies, giving them the time they need to be seen and allowed, which is the only way they can begin to dissolve and release their energy back to us.

Often the only response needed is to move away from all the avoidance patterns and make space for the closed heart.

An image that is helpful to me is imagining this closing, this place of resistance as a small child experiencing it, coming to me for comfort and holding. As a parent, it is natural to say: I have you. Stay as long as you need to, your feelings can be as big as they need to be. I'm here. This is being present with.

How does the place of pain feel when it is being seen by you? It may get more intense at first, since this may be the first time you have given it permission to express itself. Stay with. Does it feel more open, softer in any way? Some things shift fairly quickly, other, deeper things may seem to be unchanged. But one thing is certain: the next time this trigger arises, it will be different. It will have changed because you have spent time with it in an open way.

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When we are present with the closed, fearful heart, a small miracle happens: the heart then returns to openness as its innate nature.

Now notice how you feel.

The open heart might feel like a release, may include tears, which signal something is over.

It might be the understanding that you are not ready to forgive or let go of yet, but accepting yourself right there in that spot.

HOMEWORK

1) Keep on holding with pain, with the closed heart. See what happens

2) Take your metta practice on the road. Instead of doing it in formal sitting, allow the sentiments of well wishing and kindness to simply arise during the day when you are hearing the news, around other people, or alone with yourself. Let it be the background of your day.