

PROCESSING THROUGH DIFFICULT THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS

Excerpts from the book, Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn

As with physical pain, our emotional pain is also trying to tell us something. It, too, is a messenger. Feelings have to be acknowledged, at least to ourselves. They have to be encountered and felt in all their force. There is no other way through to the other side of them. If we ignore them or repress them or suppress them or sublimate them, they fester and yield no resolution, no peace. And if we exaggerate them and dramatize them and preoccupy ourselves with their turmoil without any awareness of what we are doing, they also linger on and cause us to become stuck.

Even in the tortured throes of grief or anger, in the gnawing remorse of guilt, in the slack tides of sadness and hurt, and in the swells of fear, it is still possible to be mindful, to know that in this moment I am feeling grief, I am feeling anger, I am feeling guilty or sad or hurt or frightened, or confused.

Strange as it may sound, the intentional knowing of your feelings in times of emotional suffering contains in itself the seeds of healing. Just as we know with physical pain, that part of you that can know your feelings, that sees clearly what they are, that can accept them in the present, while they are happening, no matter what they are, in their full, undisguised fury if such is the case, or in their many disguises, such as confusion, rigidity or alienation, that awareness itself has an independent perspective that is outside of your suffering. It is not buffeted by the storms of the heart and of the mind. The storms still have to run their course, their pain has to be felt. But they actually unfold differently when cradled in awareness.

For one thing, they are no longer just happening *to* you, like an outside force. You are now taking responsibility for feeling what you are feeling in this moment because this is what is happening now in your life. These moments of pain are as much moments to be lived fully as are any others, and they can actually teach us a great deal, although few of us would seek out these lessons willingly. But relating to your pain consciously, as long as it is here anyway, allows you to be a participant with your feelings rather than a victim of them.

And even though the pain you feel may be as great as if there were no seeing, no conscious awareness of a larger picture at all, this bringing of attention to emotion allows you to see your feelings with a certain degree of wisdom. The pain may be as great, but at least the edge comes off the suffering when we inquire into who is suffering, when we observe our mind flailing about, rejecting, protesting, denying, clamoring, fantasizing, hurting.

Mindfulness allows us to see more clearly into the nature of our pain. Sometimes it helps us to cut through confusion, hurt feelings, and emotional turmoil caused perhaps by misperceptions or exaggerations and our desire that things be a certain way. When you next find yourself in a period of suffering, try listening for a calm inner voice that might be saying, "Isn't this interesting, isn't it amazing what a human being can go through, amazing how much pain and anguish I can feel or create for myself or get bogged down in." In listening for a calm voice within your own heart, within your own pain, you will be reminding yourself to observe the unfolding of your emotions with wise attention, with a degree of nonattachment. You may find yourself wondering how things will finally be resolved, and knowing that you don't know, that you will just have to wait and see. Yet you can be certain that a resolution will come, that what you are experiencing is like the crest of a wave - it can't keep itself up indefinitely - it has to release. And you will know as well that how you handle what is going on at the crest of this wave can influence what the resolution will be. For instance, if, in a fit of anger, you say or do something that deeply harms another person, you have compounded the suffering of the moment even further and ensured that the resolution will be even further away, and perhaps much less to your liking. So in moments of great emotional pain, perhaps you will come to accept not knowing how things will resolve in the present moment, and in that acceptance, begin the process of healing.

You may discern within your pain, even as you feel it, that some of it is coming from non-acceptance, from rejecting what has *already* happened or what was said or done, from wanting things to be some other way, more to your liking, more under your control. Perhaps you would like another chance. Perhaps you want to turn back the clock and do something differently, or to say something you didn't, or to take back something you did. Perhaps you are jumping to conclusions without knowing the whole story and feeling hurt unnecessarily because of your own premature reactions to things. There are many ways in which we suffer, but usually they are variations on a few basic patterns.

If you are mindful as emotional storms occur, perhaps you will see in yourself an unwillingness to accept things as they already are, whether you like them or not. Perhaps that part of you that does see this has, in one way or another, already come to terms with what has happened or with your situation. Perhaps, at the same time, it recognizes that your feelings still need to play themselves out, that they are not ready to accept or to calm down, and that this is all right.

Just as in the meditation practice, our minds have a strong tendency to reject things as they are when it comes to *my* pain, *my* dilemmas, *my* grief. As Einstein pointed out, this locks us into an identification with our separateness. As we have seen, such a view can cut us off from our ability to see clearly and to heal just when we need it most.

If a momentary insight into the process of your pain unfolding should arise, let it be simply an observation. Do not jump from it to a blanket condemnation of yourself for not "being able" to accept what is or to identify with the greater whole. Your unwillingness to accept may be totally appropriate in this moment. You may feel threatened by an impending calamity or sense of doom. Or perhaps you have suffered a grievous loss, or have been wronged by someone, or you made some error in judgment that you feel remorse for and are unwilling to "just accept."

Acceptance does not mean that you *like* what has occurred or that you are merely resigned to it. It does not mean capitulation or surrender. The way we are using the word here, it means only that you admit the bare fact that whatever has happened has *already* happened and is therefore in the past. More often than not, acceptance can only come in time, as the storm plays itself out, as the winds die down. But how much healing takes place after the devastation depends on how much you are able to be awake, face its energies, and observe them with wise attention while they are raging.

Profoundly healing insights may arise if you are willing to look deeply into your own emotional pain as it occurs. One major realization you might come to is the inevitability of change, the direct perception that, whether we like it or not, *impermanence is in the very nature of things and relationships*. We see this within physical pain when we observe changes in its intensity and the coming and going of different sensations, even the shifting of the pain from one place to another in the body as sometimes happens. We also note it in our changing thoughts and feelings about pain.

When you look deeply into emotional pain at the time you are feeling it, it is hard to deny that here, too, your thoughts and feelings are coming and going, appearing and disappearing and changing with great rapidity. In times of great stress you may notice certain thoughts and feelings recurring with great frequency. They come back over and over again, causing you to keep reliving what happened or wondering what you might have done differently or how what happened could have come about. You may find yourself blaming yourself or someone else over and over again, or reliving a particular moment again and again, or wondering over and over what will happen next or what will become of you now.

But if you can be mindful at such times, if you are watching carefully, you will also notice that even these recurring images, thoughts, and feelings have a beginning and an end, that they are like waves that rise up in the mind and then subside. You may also notice that they are never quite the same. Each time one comes back, it is slightly different, never exactly the same as any previous wave.

You may also notice that the intensity of your feelings cycles as well. One moment there may be a dull hurt, the next moment intense anguish and fury, the next moment fear, then dullness again or exhaustion. You may even forget you hurt altogether for brief moments. In seeing these changes in your emotional state, you may come to realize that none of what you are experiencing is permanent. You can actually see for yourself that the intensity of the pain is not constant, that it changes, goes up and down, comes and goes, just as your breath comes and goes.

That part of you that is mindful is just seeing what is transpiring from moment to moment, nothing more. It is not rejecting the bad, it is not condemning anything or anybody, it is not wishing that things were different, it is not even upset. Awareness, like a field of compassionate intelligence located within your own heart, takes it all in and serves as a source of peace within the turmoil, much as a mother would be a source of peace, compassion, and perspective for a child who was upset. She knows that whatever is troubling her child will pass, so she can provide comfort, reassurance, and peace in her very being.

When we cultivate mindfulness in our own hearts, we can direct a similar compassion toward ourselves. Sometimes we need to care for ourselves as if that part of us that is suffering is our own child. Why not show compassion, kindness, and sympathy toward our own being, even as we open fully to our pain? To treat our self with as much kindness as we would another person in pain is a wonderfully healing meditation in its own right. It cultivates loving kindness and compassion, which know no boundaries.

Practicing moment-to-moment awareness amounts to a systematic way of teaching your body and mind to develop calmness within or beneath difficult thoughts and or emotions. The more you practice, the more comfortable you become in your own skin. The more comfortable you feel, the closer you come to perceiving that your troubling thoughts and or emotions, anxiety and fears are not you and that they do not have to rule your life.

As you come to taste even brief moments of comfort and relaxation, you may notice, both during meditation and at other times, that you are not *always* feeling anxious for example. In observing this, you see that anxiety varies in intensity and comes and goes just like everything else. It is a temporary mental state, just like boredom or happiness.

With regular practice, you learn to get in touch with and draw upon your own deep capacity for physiological relaxation and calmness, even at times when there are problems that have to be faced and resolved. In doing so, you also learn that it is possible to trust a stable inner core within yourself that is reliable, dependable, unwavering. Gradually the tension in your body and the difficult thought or emotion in your mind become less intrusive and lose some of their force. While the surface of your mind can still be choppy and agitated at times, like the surface of the ocean, you can learn to accept the mind's being that way and experience at the same time an underlying inner peace in a domain that is always right here, a domain in which the waves are damped to gentle swells at most.

An important part of this learning process is coming to see, as we have now emphasized many times, that you are not your thoughts and feelings and that you do not have to believe them or react to them or be driven or tyrannized by them. As you practice, focusing on whatever you are paying primary attention to in your meditation practice, you are likely to come to see your thoughts and feelings as discrete, short-lived events, as individual waves on the ocean. These waves rise up in the ocean of your awareness for a moment and then fall back. You can watch them and perceive them as "events in the field of your consciousness."

When you observe the unfolding of your own thinking, moment by moment, you may come to notice that thoughts carry different levels of emotional charge. Some are highly negative and pessimistic, loaded with anxiety, insecurity, fear, gloom, doom, and condemnation. Others are positive and optimistic, joyful and open, accepting and caring. Still others are neutral, neither positive nor negative in emotional content, just matter-of-fact thoughts. Our thinking proceeds in rather chaotic patterns of reactivity and association, elaborating on its own content, building imaginary worlds, and filling the silence with busyness. Thoughts with a high emotional charge have a way of recurring again and again. When they come up, they grab hold of your attention like a powerful magnet, carrying your mind away from your breathing or from awareness of your body.

When you look at thoughts as just thoughts, purposefully not reacting to their content and to their emotional charge, you become at least a little freer from their attraction or repulsion. You are less likely to get sucked into them quite as much or as often. The more powerful the charge, the more the content of the thought is likely to capture your attention and draw you away from just being in the moment. Your work is simply seeing and letting go, seeing and letting go, sometimes ruthlessly and relentlessly if need be, always intentionally and courageously. Just seeing and letting go.

When you practice this way with *all* of the thoughts that come up during meditation, whether they are "good," "bad," or "neutral" in content, with the highly charged ones and with the weakly charged ones, you will

find that the ones that are anxious and fearful in content will seem less powerful and less threatening. They will have less of a hold over your attention because now you are seeing them as "just thoughts" and no longer as "reality" or "the truth." It becomes easier to remind yourself that you don't have to get caught up in their content. It becomes easier to see how you contribute to the ongoing strength of certain thoughts by fearing them and, ironically, by holding on to them.

Seeing them in this light breaks the insidious chain by which one difficult thought leads to another and to another until you become lost in a self-created world of fear and insecurity. Instead, it will be just one thought with anxiety content, seeing it, letting it go, returning to calmness; another thought with anxiety content, seeing it, letting it go, calmness; over and over and over, thought by thought by thought, holding on to the breath (for dear life if you must) to get you through the choppy times.

Working mindfully with highly charged thoughts and feelings does not mean that we do not value the expression of strong feelings or that strong feelings are bad, problematic, or dangerous and that every effort should be made to "control" them or get rid of them or suppress them. Observing your feelings mindfully and accepting them and then letting go of them does not mean that you are trying to invalidate or get rid of them. It means that you know what you are experiencing. It also does not mean that you won't act on your thoughts and feelings or express them in their full power! It simply means that when you do act, you are more likely to do so with clarity and inner balance because you have some perspective on your own experience and are not just being driven by mindless reactivity. Then the force of your feelings can be applied creatively to solve or dissolve problems rather than compounding difficulties and causing harm to yourself or others, as so often happens when you lose your center. This is another example of the way in which the emotion-focused perspective and the problem-focused perspective can complement each other in mindfulness.

As we change our relationship to our thoughts by paying attention to the process of thinking, we will also come to see that perhaps we should change the way we think and speak about our thoughts and feelings altogether. Rather than saying "I am afraid" or "I am anxious," both of which make "you" *into* the anxiety or fear, it would actually be more accurate to say "I am having a lot of fear-filled (or fearful) thoughts." In this way you are emphasizing that you are not the content of your thoughts and that you do not have to identify with their content. Instead you can just be aware of it, accept it, and listen to it caringly. Then your thoughts will not drive you toward even more fear, panic, and anxiety but can be used instead to help you see more clearly what is actually on your mind.

As you look deeply into the process of your own thinking from the perspective of calmness and mindfulness, you may come to see that much of your thinking and emotions occur in recognizable patterns that are driven by discomfort of one kind or another. There is the discomfort of being dissatisfied with the present and wanting something more to happen, to possess something more that would make you feel better, more complete, more whole. This pattern could be described as the impulse to get what you want and to hold on to it, much like the monkey who holds on to the banana and is trapped.

If you look deeply into it, you will probably find that, at a deep level, such impulses are driven, much as we might hate to admit it, by a kind of greediness, the desire for "more for me" in order to be happy. Perhaps it is money or control or recognition or love that you want. Whatever it is you are craving at the moment, to be driven by such impulses means that, on a deep level, you don't believe that you are whole as you are.

Then there is the opposite pattern, dominated by thoughts and feelings of wanting certain things *not* to happen or to stop happening, the desire to get rid of certain things or elements in your life that you think are preventing you from feeling better, happier, more satisfied. These patterns of thought can be described as driven by hatred, dislike, rejection, or a need to get rid of what you don't want or don't like so that you can be happy.

Mindfulness brought to our actual behavior may drive home the realization that we can be caught, in our mind and actions, between these two driving motives of liking/wanting (greed) and disliking/not wanting (aversion) - however subtle and unconscious they may be to the point that our lives become one incessant vacillation between pursuit of what we like and flight from what we don't like. Such a course will lead to few moments of peace or happiness. How could it? There will always be cause for difficult emotions. At any moment you might lose what you already have. Or you might never get what you want. Or you might get it and find out it wasn't what you wanted after all. You might still not feel complete.

Unless you can be mindful of the activity of your own mind, you won't even notice that this is going on. A blanket of unawareness, our old acquaintance the automatic-pilot mode, will ensure that you will continue to bounce from pillar to post, feeling out of control much of the time. This is basically because you think happiness is solely dependent on whether you are getting what you want.

This process winds up consuming a great deal of energy. It can blanket so much of our life with unawareness that we hardly ever perceive that we may actually be basically okay right now, that it may be possible to find a core of harmony within ourselves in the midst of the full catastrophe of our difficult thoughts and emotions. In fact, when you think about it, where else could it possibly be found?

The only way to free yourself from a lifetime of being tyrannized by your own thought processes, whether you suffer from excessive anxiety or not, is to come to see your thoughts for what they are and to discern the sometimes subtle but most often not-so-subtle-seeds of craving and aversion at work within them. When you can successfully step back and see that you are not your thoughts and feelings and that you do not have to believe them and you certainly do not have to act on them, when you see, vividly, that many of them are inaccurate, judgmental, and fundamentally greedy, you will have found the key to understanding why you feel so much fear and anxiety. At the same time you will have found the key to maintaining your own equilibrium. Fear, panic, and anxiety will no longer be uncontrollable demons. Instead you will see them as natural mental states that can be worked with and accepted just like any others. Then, lo and behold, the demons may not come around and bother you so much. You may find that you don't see them at all for long stretches. You may wonder where they went or even whether they ever existed. Occasionally you may see some smoke, just enough to remind you that the lair of the dragon is still occupied, that fear is a natural part of living, but not something you have to be afraid of.

Problem Focused & Emotion Focused Coping

Working mindfully with your emotions begins by acknowledging to yourself what you are actually feeling and thinking in the present. It is helpful to come to a complete stop and, even for short periods, to *sit with the hurt*, breathing with it, feeling it, not trying to explain it or change it or make it go away. This in itself brings calmness.

Once again, it helps to remember to look at your situation with eyes of wholeness. From a systems perspective, there are two major interacting components to emotional pain. One is the domain of your *feelings*; the other is the domain of the situation, or *problem*, which lies at the root of the feelings. In being with your hurt, you might ask yourself whether you can see your emotional state as separate from the details of what has actually happened or is happening. If you can differentiate between these two components of your dilemma, you are more likely to chart your way through to an effective resolution of the entire situation, including your feelings. If, on the other hand, the domain of feelings and the domain of the problem itself get confused, as they often do, it is very difficult to see clearly and to know how to act decisively. This confusion itself generates more pain and more suffering.

Try focusing on the problem. Ask yourself if you are seeing it in its fullness, apart from your strong feelings *about the problem*. Then ask yourself whether there might be actions that you could take that would help solve things in the domain of the problem. If the whole problem seems too big to handle, try breaking it down into manageable parts in your mind. Then act. *Do something*. Listen to and trust your intuition, your heart. You might attempt to correct the problem or to reduce the extent of the damage as best you can. On the other hand, you might see that there are times when absolutely nothing can be done. If this is your perception, then really do *nothing*. *Do non-doing!* You can use your understanding of non-doing just to be with what is in such moments, intentionally. This is as much of a *response* as anything you might *do*. Sometimes, it is the most appropriate response possible.

By acting mindfully when you can, whether it results in doing or non-doing, you are putting the past behind you. As you act in the present, things change in response to what you choose to do, and this in turn will affect the problem itself. This way of proceeding is sometimes called *problem-focused coping*. It can help you to function effectively in spite of strong emotional reactions; and it can prevent you from doing things that might make matters worse than they already are.

On a parallel track, you can bring awareness to what you are feeling. Try to be aware of the source of your suffering. Is it from guilt or fear or loss? What are the thoughts going through your mind? Are they accurate? Can you just watch the play of your thoughts and feelings with full acceptance, seeing them as a storm system or a cresting wave that has a structure and life of its own? Are they affecting your judgment and your ability to see clearly? Are they telling you to do things that you are aware might make things worse rather than better? Bringing wise attention to the domain of feelings is part of what is sometimes called emotion-focused coping. As we have seen, just bringing mindfulness to the storm system itself influences how it resolves and so helps you to cope with it. A further step in this process comes when you are able to entertain alternative ways of seeing your feelings, when you are able to hold them in the consciousness of being your own loving parent, when you can bring gentleness and loving kindness to your self in the midst of your pain.