

Bringing the Monastery Home

By Shinzen Young

I've been teaching meditation for two and a half decades, always exploring new ways to improve what I teach. Over the course of those years, I have made a number of interesting discoveries, some of which do not appear in standard books on the subject. One question I struggled with early on was how to make the practice doable by anyone, without watering down its intensity. When people read accounts of traditional monastic training, the usual reaction is, "If that's what it takes to get enlightenment, I think I'll wait for a few lifetimes." And indeed it's true. Most people have neither the time nor the inclination to do intensive formal meditation practice. Why should they? Isn't there enough physical and emotional discomfort in ordinary life? Why intentionally seek it out?

But the monastery will come to each of us when we have to confront our fears, losses, compulsions and anxieties, or process the aftermath of trauma. The monastery comes to us in the form of emotional crisis, illness or injury, a phobia or a failed relationship. The question is whether we will be in a position to recognize and use it as such. If there were a way to help people maintain continuous quality meditation through intense real world challenges, anyone could experience insight and purification comparable to that of traditional renunciates' regimes. Basically it boils down to this: Intensity of Challenge multiplied by Sharpness of Mindfulness multiplied by Depth of Equanimity equals the Rate of Psycho-spiritual Growth. When things are most challenging, we have the opportunity to leap forward in our spiritual development, provided we make use of the challenge.

There is a well-known story of the Buddha that reveals a connection between our feeling lives and our spiritual growth, although its message is not obvious and requires reflection. It is a legend about the way that the Buddha's disciple Kashyapa became the main successor of the Buddha. It's a great teaching story because it conveys a universal truth, although there's every reason to believe that the story is not factual.

A Famous Smile

Once when the Buddha was about to preach, instead of saying anything he just lifted up a flower and was silent. Standing before him in the room were five hundred enlightened beings known as "arhats." The presence of even one arhat is transformative. It's impossible to imagine the power of five hundred! Anyway, in the story there were five hundred present. Four hundred and ninety-nine were absolutely still and silent, but one - whose name was Kashyapa - smiled after a brief silence. The Buddha approached him and said that Kashyapa had "the precious eye of wisdom" that is the "subtle gate of truth" and the essence of absolute joy. The Buddha was thus acknowledging Kashyapa's enlightenment as unique among these very enlightened beings.

This story appears in a classic Zen **koan**, a problem or puzzle that is meant to be solved through direct meditation experience rather than thinking. There are many koans in Zen practice that are used to push the respondents beyond intellectual answers. The koan about Kashyapa says,

The gathered disciples were all enlightened, why did Buddha single out Kashyapa to be his successor?

Holding up the flower, the Buddha invited his disciples to manifest their enlightenment. When you are empty of any congealing or freezing up in your mind, you express this emptiness in the way you are and it can be witnessed by one who is trained to see it. In this case, when the Buddha held up the flower, the arhats “became the flower” in the sense that they became one-with-the-flower: no “self” and no “flower.” In this deep state of concentration there was only the activity of flowering, we might say.

That flowering is paradoxical too. It’s both everything and nothing - the divine and the particular rolled into one. This becoming-one-with-the-other and dissolving-the-self lasts only briefly. In fact, it happens hundreds of times a day to all of us, but we are not trained to notice it and so we miss it. When we are able to experience this for even three or four seconds, we find that our separateness-as-self has been transcended. When the Buddha held up that flower, the arhats all flowered. They would have remained flowering for as long as the flower was before them. Only one of them smiled in addition to flowering. Kashyapa manifested his enlightenment differently from the other arhats.

What does this mean? There are two aspects of a full enlightenment: one is the no-self that the flowering arhats showed in the absolute silence of nothing **and** everything. This no-self can be experienced with flowers, garbage cans, saints and sinners. Doing this moment-by-moment, year after year, eventually allows a person to participate in the Source of being itself. This is freedom from your limited sense of self; there is no body sensation, no image, no verbal thought. No self arises. Such a state of deep awareness is a complete experience of doing the flower, the mountain, the blade of grass, whatever is the object of concentration. Naturally it is very difficult to train our attention to a point where we can perceive reality in a state of no-self. Difficult as it is, this is only one pole of enlightenment.

The other pole is expressed in Kashyapa’s smile. What is a smile? It is an expression of humanity. Humans smile. Flowers flower. Humans smile, talk, remember, and recognize things. Human beings have body sensations, images, and verbal thought that distinguish them from flowers and cows and tables. Kashyapa showed the Buddha that he could flower **and** smile. He could return effortlessly from the no-self state to the human self and embody his own personality as freely as he flowered.

All of us have a tendency to think “I want to be *free of myself* - all this internal chatter, these difficult feelings and habits in my mind.” Our minds are cluttered and we don’t like it. But in fact, our body sensations, mental images and internal talk can be

experienced with the same kind of mindfulness and equanimity that we bring to the full experience of a flower. Then our thoughts and feelings and sensations are not disruptions to being and doing things freely. When we are clear enough - that is, distinct in our perceptions and transparent in our being - the spiritual light of the Source of all being can shine through the personal self and its personality. Then we are complete in our experience of the feeling self. The self is experienced then as a wave, not a particle, as a movement, not a thing.

Kashyapa's smile, like anyone's smile, was such a **wave event**. It spread out over three-dimensional space, changing through time. Kashyapa's smile expressed something extraordinary. It expressed a radical fullness of being human. The other arhats expressed their oneness with the flower which showed they could dissolve the self and become the other. Kashyapa showed that he had mastered the second pole of enlightenment and could bring the clarity and freedom of no-self states to his own human personality.

Manifesting personality (as different from having personality) requires the ability to feel things with **radical fullness** and to become a **person of complete feeling**. Radical here implies going "down to the very root" and going way "beyond the norm." Learning to experience your sensation and feelings with radical fullness is like taking yourself to a whole new level of experience. Although Kashyapa's smile lasted for only an instant, the Buddha's keen eye spotted that something rare and noble had occurred. Kashyapa had become a person of complete feeling. This book is an invitation for you to do the same.

About Me Personally

I have struggled with my own feelings since I was a Jewish kid growing up in the 1950's in Los Angeles. While still in junior high school, as odd as it seems, I became passionately interested in Japanese language and culture and convinced my parents to let me attend Japanese ethnic school every afternoon and all day Saturday. Naturally, I continued Hebrew school as well. You can imagine that I was different from many of my school mates in L.A. From my early teens onwards, I had this strong and apparently weird connection to Japan and Japanese people.

After high school, I attended UCLA with a major in Asian languages and during my senior year I went abroad to study in Japan. While there I arranged through a friend to spend a month at a Zen temple near Kyoto. Not that I wanted to meditate, mind you. I wanted to be in the atmosphere of the temple for its culture and language. I hung out with the monks and sharpened my language skills by studying some of the temple books written in arcane ancient Chinese.

When I watched the monks in the meditation hall sitting bolt upright in pin-drop silence for hours on end, I wondered "How can **anyone** do that?" I sensed that the monks were happy in a way fundamentally different from anything I had ever encountered, as though they knew a secret that they would never impose on me, but would gladly share if I were interested. I had to admit that the meditation looked pretty

cool, but I thought that it was definitely not for me. I had spent my young life avoiding boredom and physical discomfort and meditation practice seemed to me to have a lot of both of them.

After I finished my degree at UCLA, I went on to attend a Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin in Buddhist studies with a big emphasis on languages - Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and the like. Broadly speaking, Buddhism is divided into three major practice traditions: Vipassana or Mindfulness meditation associated with Buddhism in South East Asia; Zen Buddhism that arose in China and later spread all over East Asia; and Vajrayana primarily associated with Tibetan Buddhism. Vajrayana did not originate in Tibet though. Like the other traditions, it began in India. The characteristic practice of Vajrayana involves rituals that on the surface appear to be invocations of deities, but actually represent a sequence of subtle and clever meditation techniques. Even now, with the popularity of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism in America, few people are aware that an early form of Vajrayana found its way from India to China and then to Japan in the ninth century. It is still practiced in the Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism. Because so little was known in the West of Shingon, I decided that it would be the perfect field within which to stake out my academic bailiwick.

I returned to Japan to a university at Mt. Koya, in the mountains south of Osaka, the headquarters of the Shingon School. My plan was to study there for a year and write my dissertation on Shingon, but several things happened that changed all that. First, the monks at Mt. Koya refused to teach me despite my command of the language and my academic training. The abbot of the monastery said "What we have here is a method for fundamentally transforming who you are as a person. This is not something to be studied as an intellectual curiosity." If I wanted to become a monk for a while and live as an acolyte, they would consider teaching me if they found me to be sincere.

How could I go back to my university in what seemed like failure and disgrace? But how could I live as a Buddhist monk and be subjected to boredom and physical discomfort? It turned out that I feared humiliation more than boredom and so I decided to stay. My days consisted of doing tasks around the temple: washing dishes, cleaning outhouses, arranging the altar, mopping the wooden floors and raking the sand garden. All the while I was thinking "Why on earth am I doing this? I'm wasting my time here when I could be brushing up on my colloquial Tibetan or reading old Chinese texts!"

Eventually one of the senior monks took me aside and clued me in: "The simple tasks you do all day are **meditation**. Focus intentionally on just what's in front of you. Your mind will wander away a million times each day. Bring it back a million and one times." After some time, I realized that I could actually concentrate on what I was doing whether it was dishes or talking to a friend. That felt really good.

In the midst of this early training at Mt. Koya, a tragic event changed my outlook on life. An admired and dear friend of mine died suddenly in a terrible accident. The effect on me was devastating and transforming. I got very serious about practicing meditation. I did not want to live my life in constant fear of pain and death. I stayed at

Mt. Koya for three more years, living as a monk practicing meditation. When I returned to the States, I had changed so much that I took a leave of absence from the University of Wisconsin and went to live at the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles where I continued to practice and did some teaching. I never went back to academic life, but I did eventually become a teacher - of meditation. At the time I settled into life at the Buddhist Meditation Center, I began to study mathematics and science very seriously. I became fascinated with the possibility of cross-fertilizing the best achievements of the East, the internal technology of meditation, with the best achievements of the West, the methods of science and mathematics. My own meditation practice continued to develop, but in the back of my mind I knew I was doing something a bit risky: practicing without guidance from more senior teachers. Psycho-spiritual growth is a many-faceted affair. One can be very strong in some areas, but stunted in others without quite realizing it. One aspect of growth is encouraging friends, family, and students to be candid with you. Another involves continually studying with teachers even after you yourself are a teacher. I knew that I needed a teacher although I didn't like to admit that to myself.

A Growl and Another Smile

One day I got a call from the former boyfriend of a former girlfriend of mine. "Hi, this is Jeff. I'm living at Cimarron Zen Center studying with Sasaki Roshi and he wants to give a teisho (public talk), but they don't have anyone to interpret his Japanese. Would you be willing to? We need someone next Saturday." I said that I'd think about it and get back to him.

I was scared. Sasaki Roshi (*roshi* means venerable teacher or master) is one of the most senior Buddhist masters living in the Western world. At the time of this call he was already in his 70s. With a face as soft as a baby's and a tongue as sharp as a samurai sword, he was famous for demolishing his students' "fixated self," often through public ego butchering. You recall I had a lot of issues around humiliation and shaming. I was scared what he might do with my ego if I formed any connection with him.

Traditional Japanese people (and Sasaki Roshi was definitely an old-timer) make a clear distinction between "inside" (close) and "outside" (more formal) relationships. If I went as an outside hired interpreter, as opposed to becoming a student of his, he would probably treat me with formal courtesy, I thought. But maybe not, I also thought.

Sasaki Roshi expects students to submit to, even revel in, the deconstruction of their fixated sense of self because he is close to completing the process of deconstruction of his own. Even though I would expect him to treat me politely in the formal context of interpreter, there would be no guarantee. Trying to pin down a Zen master is like trying to nail tofu to the wall. I took a calculated emotional risk and agreed to interpret for his teisho. It turned out to be a very difficult experience, but not for the reason that I had feared. He was quite gentle with my ego but it was hard to understand what he was trying to say, which was strange because I was quite familiar with spoken Japanese and had a scholarly background in Sino-Japanese Buddhism.

The reason for the difficulty was that Sasaki Roshi is not only deeply enlightened, but he is also highly creative. He has his own unique and highly innovative paradigm for the Ancient Path, fundamentally different from any of the standard models.

I was intrigued by his brilliance and attracted by the changes that occurred in me just by being around him. But I was not yet ready to risk the emotional challenge of having my ego assailed. For five years I served as his interpreter for his public talks, all along knowing that I needed a teacher but was still too afraid to sign on. Eventually my need for him became too great to resist and I became his student. Once on the inside, I knew it was only a matter of time before lightning would strike me.

We were at Cornell University doing the Summer Seminars on the Buddhist sutras (scriptures). Many of Roshi's monks were there, including Leonard Cohen, the songwriter, who is one of his most senior students and one of his best friends. I had suggested to Roshi that I be allowed to teach on my own in addition to interpreting his talks and those of the other scholars he had invited from Japan. Clearly he was displeased.

Vehemently gesticulating, glaring and growling, he spit forth a torrent of stinging sound bites reminding me that I had lived as a monk long enough to know the importance of total devotion to one's appointed role. Hadn't I learned **anything** from my years of practice? As I walked away from him, I was acutely aware of how the verbal thoughts of my mind were continuing to do battle with him:

Is it him or is it me that's fixated? He may be enlightened, but on this one **I'm** right! Touchy son of a bitch, he is! This is the kind of bullshit that's prevented him from attracting the following he deserves. Thirty years in this country and all that concentration power and he still hasn't even learned English! Well, fuck you, man, and the horse you rode in on! I'm smiling. Why am I smiling? Am I smiling?

I was smiling. My whole body was smiling, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Most noticeably my innards were smiling: my stomach, heart, lungs, entrails. Everything felt soft and liquid on the inside. It was as though I had just come out of a two-hour deep muscle massage. I was astonished at the delicious dissonance between the words in my head and the feelings in my body.

When a person communicates with you in an emotionally expressive way, the message imparted contains two very distinct components: Think this! (in your mind) Feel that! (in your body). The first involves language and association. It is specific – pertaining to certain people, places, objects and relationships. It is cultural and complex. The second involves broad categories of somatic feeling flavors. It is generic in nature – the product of much earlier stages of evolution.

Your feeling reactions arise as combinations of a relatively few basic somatic colorations - anger, fear, sadness, joy, fascination, desire, lust. Besides thoughts and feelings, is there anything else imparted to you through an emotion-tinged interaction?

Ordinarily no. But an exception occurs if you are fortunate enough to be reamed out by a person of complete feeling and have the ability to pay attention to what is actually going on in your experience.

Subtle is **significant**. Remember Kashyapa's smile? Its external expression subtly communicated its internal flow – the wave of vibrating energy that showed through his humanness. I had said something that caused Sasaki Roshi to have uncomfortable sensations which motivated him to a vigorous response. Because he did not fixate on his words and feelings, they passed through him as a kind of vitalizing and refreshing energy. The way he gesticulated, glared and growled communicated to my body how his body was processing his uncomfortable sensations, and that induced in me a similar state. The surface message appeared to be one of heartless shaming and rejection. The underlying message imparted unconditional and life-transforming love independent of the words and phrases.

I have been with my teacher for twenty years now and he has profoundly informed how I teach. Yet in many ways our approaches are very different. Zen, with its non-rational koans and ineffable "just sitting," is like a powerful evocative poem. Although I sit in Sasaki Roshi's zendo, when I'm on the cushion (there or anywhere), I prefer the systematically efficient, though somewhat prosaic, Method of Mindfulness. It's just a personality thing.

Another personality thing: I never growl at students. On the contrary, I try my best to create a tangible atmosphere of emotional safety. I figure, why artificially evoke fear and shame? Just being alive guarantees plenty in the way of emotional challenge.

Mindfulness Skills

Many factors contribute to becoming a person of complete feeling, but the three most important are: mindfulness, equanimity, and sensitivity to impermanence. **Mindfulness** is the ability to clearly detect exactly what is going on in your experience second by second. **Equanimity** is the ability to allow your experience to arise without unnecessary fixating second by second. **Sensitivity to impermanence** is the ability to detect the type and magnitude of change in your experience second by second, allowing insight into the ebb and flow of the Source of our existence.

These are the core skills for becoming a person of complete feeling. Cultivating them, even at a beginning level, would guarantee that you would begin to move towards a more ideal relationship to your own feelings, but they are not wholly sufficient to reach the full psychological and spiritual maturity of your emotional life. There are many dimensions involved in using these skills in a fully human life; all of us are better in applying the skills in some areas than in others. Psycho-spiritual lopsidedness will always be present as you move along in gaining emotional skill. But don't let that discourage you. The crucial factor for maintaining balance as you grow in the practice of mindfulness is your willingness to be open and invite the feedback of those around you.

Keeping open to others' complaints, praise, disappointments, loves, angers, and

hurt for which you are responsible or are seen as responsible gives you plenty of opportunity to work on your mindfulness. Being skillful in listening and responding to difficult feelings and criticisms expressed about you will surely lead to a raft of new awareness and perspective on yourself. This, combined with systematic cultivation of mindfulness, equanimity, and sensitivity to impermanence will virtually guarantee success in becoming a more completely feeling person. Strictly speaking, there are only two skills involved: mindfulness and equanimity. Sensitivity to impermanence can be looked upon as a consequence of very careful observation of our experience. Equanimity is the other component of our sensitivity to impermanence. When we are able to be matter-of-fact and centered in our observations, the more pliant our feeling core becomes and the more readily it reflects the forces of change.

Pain Versus Suffering

The terms that I use for our emotional difficulties and fulfillment are in some ways a new usage of old words. As a mindfulness meditation teacher, I am constantly aware of the barriers to expressing feelings precisely. Language does not allow us to make precise and subtle distinctions for some of our emotional states. When we are left without a precise and adequate word for a particular experience, we have the choice of inventing a new word or using an old one in a specialized way. I have decided to use two common words, “pain” and “suffering,” in a distinct and highly specific way. I am not the first Buddhist teacher to make this distinction, and yet I have my particular slant on the meanings.

I define “pain” or “discomfort” (which will be interchangeable with pain, depending on the context) as any uncomfortable sensation in the body. This usage differs from the ordinary one in two ways: usually pain means a sensation of physical origin, but I will use it to mean **any** discomfort in the body, including emotional discomfort. So, in my vocabulary the words **pain and discomfort** refer, for example, to both heartache and heartburn. The spectrum of physical pain and discomfort covers a whole range of intensity from mild antsy feelings to severe physical agonies.

If that’s pain, then what does “suffering” mean? Suffering, as I am using the word, is what happens when we freeze up or congeal our experience. Suffering is an unnecessary fixating or holding moment by moment. This idea may be a little hard to grasp. Here is why: I am trying to define a term in such a way that captures a congealing or freezing up that takes place throughout our physical system, even deep into the neural processing chain, and often occurs entirely outside our awareness. Typically, each arising of physical or emotional discomfort gets frozen **before** it reaches our conscious awareness. For most people, then, the experience of pain is almost always accompanied by suffering. Most of us do not ever experience **pure** pain.

If you experience only pain, without suffering, the pain is not a problem although it hurts. Just as when I was able to feel the effects of Sasaki Roshi’s attack on my ego without holding onto the sense of humiliation. Without suffering, pain is pure energy, undistorted by the ways we hold onto it through our ideas or even our sensory system. Because it hurts it continues to give us the information and motivation we need to direct

our actions and decisions. Because it hurts it keeps us connected to our humanity and the richness of our existence. In order to experience this for yourself, you would have to focus on pain in a continuous and disciplined way for a long time. But you may not be willing to do that unless you already know how to experience pain without suffering. We humans are constantly freezing our pains *and* pleasures, indeed all of our experience, without knowing it.

Freezing Versus Flowing

There are two conditions that need to be understood fully in learning about mindfulness. The first is that freezing or congealing around pain or pleasure brings “suffering” in the way I use the term. When we have pain or discomfort and we freeze up in that moment, we suffer. When we have pleasure of even the subtlest sort and we grasp onto it, we suffer. We are cut off from the core of our being.

There are two ways to reduce suffering that is connected to pain or discomfort: decrease the discomfort or pain by changing our circumstances (possible only under some circumstances) or reduce the habit of congealing or freezing up around the discomfort (always possible). Similarly, there are two ways to increase our fulfillment in pleasure: increase the pleasure (not always possible and often leads to addictions) or learn to contact even the subtlest pleasure clearly, eliminating the congealing (always possible). The two options are not mutually exclusive; many times it is possible to do both of them. And yet, only with the second option do we have the true freedom that does not depend on situations or circumstances.

To reduce or eliminate our freezing, grasping or holding is what I will call “mindfulness skill” throughout this book. When we have achieved this skill and can use it on a moment to moment basis in our feeling lives, we are free to be persons of complete feeling. Rather than rigidify and fixate on either fears of pain or desires for pleasure, we find ourselves “flowing” through our emotional lives feeling the incredible lightness of our being. As you can see in the stories about Kashyapa and Sasaki Roshi, a person of complete feeling fully and poignantly senses and expresses the whole range of human emotions. This person would never have to cut off from other people or from oneself because emotional life was too overwhelming.

Arianna’s Phone Call

I encourage my own meditation students to phone me when challenging things happen to them in the real world. I view it as a very efficient use of my time, since my job is to facilitate maximal growth which is a function of intensity, mindfulness, and equanimity. For these reasons, I have often been able to bring the classical results of monastic training to mainstream modern life, allowing people to make radical shifts in their paradigms without radical change in lifestyle.

Recently, I was in my little apartment on Lake Champlain in the city of Burlington, Vermont and I received a desperate phone call from my student “Arianna,” a petite well-spoken English woman who comes to my retreats in Southern California. She had been

car-jacked just hours before. “I’m calling for some help with my emotions. A couple of guys pointed a gun through the car window and demanded that I let them in,” she began. “Crazy as it sounds, I refused. I just got out of the car and gave them the keys and they took the car and used it to rob a 7-Eleven and then a bank! They weren’t very smart though; the car was customized so the police were able to spot it quickly. I’ll get it back. The guys are in jail now. But I’m worried I may be permanently scarred by the trauma. I can’t stop going over the events in my mind.”

After we established that she had done what was needed to take care of the interactions with the police and the insurance company - the objective side of the situation - we began to work on her subjective experience. Alternating short periods of telephone contact with longer periods during which Arianna meditated, we were able to work together for several hours.

For adult humans, emotions usually arise as pictures in our mind’s eye, verbal thought, and body sensations. Memories, fantasies, and other thoughts often present themselves through *mental images*. The reasons, rationalizations, judgments, arguments and counter-arguments can be heard as *internal self-talk*. Meanwhile the real juice of feeling is coursing through the body as an intricate arabesque of somatic sensation, whether or not one is consciously aware of it. In the final analysis, these *body sensations* are usually running the show with our emotions. In a sense, emotional experience, even very negative experience, is simple. It involves only these three strands of activity. But it is also complex because the strands are tangled at many levels. Look carefully at a strand of imagery and you may notice many wispy threads of self-talk and body sensations mixed into it. Look at one of the talk threads and you may detect microfilaments of image and body mixed into it.

Mindfulness untangles the strands. Equanimity unties their knots.

When we talk about applying mindfulness practice to emotional trauma or physical pain, most people think they should focus their meditation **away from** the difficult experience, concentrating on something else until the discomfort passes or is weakened. This “something else” could be the breath, an internal mantra, a pleasant image or external sounds - or a positive healing image or thought. Although this can be a useful strategy, its drawback is that it may be impossible to do it after a shocking experience. Indeed, this was true for Arianna in the aftermath of her trauma. There is another problem, as well, with the focus-away strategy. It’s important not to develop a habit of focusing away from or suppressing difficult and uncomfortable experiences because then we are more susceptible to being caught by these experiences when we are least aware. On the positive side, focusing-away strategies can reduce unproductive thought patterns, increase pleasant emotions, and most important, can build up your base level of concentration power because they require focus on a particular object of meditation. Depending on how you go about it, they can also increase your equanimity.

I prefer the strategy of **focusing on** emotions, but I gave Arianna the choice of doing one or the other practice. She chose to focus on her immediate experience,

although she knew that this strategy might make her feelings more intense for awhile.

Focusing on Emotions

Penetrating an emotion is sometimes like lancing a boil. It looks really messy and it hurts like hell for a little while, but when it's over you literally get a lifesaving detoxification. The boil analogy is really quite apt here; real-time emotions intensify when they interact with the pool of unresolved poison and pain stored up from the past. By carefully focusing on what's coming in the present you actually clear away some of that subconscious storehouse of toxic feelings from the past. This is what I mean by lifesaving detoxification or spiritual purification. This is *catharsis* in the original sense of the Greek word: cleaning out. Whenever a person experiences an emotion with skill, that emotion is completely metabolized. It leaves no ghosts, residues, impacts or imprints in the deep mind.

The bad news is that most of us do not have much mindfulness skill. So each of our previous emotional experiences, even pleasant ones, have left imprints, residues or scars. Some of these are large but most of them are subtle and wispy. Subtle is significant. These residues create a cage around consciousness. Year after year they prevent us from making the changes that we want to make in ourselves and our lives. Second-by-second they also prevent us from touching the spiritual perfection that lies around and within.

When something emotional happens in the present it opens up channels into that pool of the past. When you are skillfully focusing on the present emotion you are pouring clarity and equanimity down those channels - a main line into the deep mind. This gives the deep mind the fuel it needs to boil the poison away forever. The problem is that it takes a little while for a critical mass of clarity and openness to build up. When it finally does, the experience of "I am suffering" turns into the experience of "I am being cleansed." But before this happens the feelings may intensify, but this is not inevitable. They may also dissipate just by focusing on them. It's ironic that the biggest potential problem associated with focusing on emotional discomfort is closely linked to one of its most powerful payoffs: our cage may get rattled a bit before it collapses.

A Science of Emotional Experience

In other words, I'm talking about dealing with emotional experience by using the same general principles that scientists use when dealing with other natural phenomena. When scientists are presented with a complicated, mysterious and problem-laden structure, they will often proceed in two steps. Step one: discover its simple building blocks, its natural components. Step two: investigate how those simple components get woven together into complex phenomena. For example, if you want to understand a certain physical substance begin by seeing it in terms of atoms then, investigating how those atoms combine into molecules which have certain physical properties. Or if you want to understand the structure of living organisms, begin by understanding the cells

then, investigate how the cells combine to form organs and organic systems. A similar procedure is part of the nuts and bolts of mathematics.

This way of relating to emotions sounds very cold, distant and analytic. *But the effect is the exact opposite of what you would expect.* It clarifies and unblocks the natural flow of emotion. The result is a direct, deep and abiding contact with the feeling core which lies at the center of every human being. This is paradox number one. When done in the right way, analytic deconstruction of emotion actually allows you to feel more deeply and intensely. And here is paradox number two. *The feelings become deeper and more intense but at the same time less problematic.* Unpleasant feelings are more poignant but at the same time cause less suffering and pleasant feelings are richer but at the same time lead to less neediness.

Remember though, I said, "...to understand a physical substance, *begin* by...to understand a living organism, *begin* by..." I didn't say that the process would end there. Analysis into components is often a good starting place. It turns out that if you divide the strands of your emotions deeply enough, you go beyond even the feeling core. You come into direct contact with impermanence, the vibrant spiritual activity that is also the Source of creation. At that point, you have literally escaped *into* feeling, as opposed to the usual alternatives: enmeshment with it on one hand, or avoidance of it on the other. In the end, the reason for developing emotional skill is to spiritualize all feeling states - anger, fear, elation, eroticism...right down to the tiny joys and tribulations of day-to-day life.

Here again, an analogy with science seems appropriate. As we analyze matter beyond the level of the atom, we presumably come closer to the universal matrix of things. Physicists aren't at all sure of what that is, but proposed theories often bear names suggesting vibrating space: "quantum fluctuations of the void," "vibrating superstrings" and such. This is a good metaphor for what happens *internally* as our mindfulness increases our capacity to clarify our experiences. An interesting question: is this *just* a convenient metaphor or is there something more to it? Lots of claims have been made, but the bottom line is that no one knows.

To sum it up we can discern three tiers of effects associated with the focus-on-your emotions approach. The immediate benefits are:

- Insight into the nature of an emotional experience.
- A decreasing of emotional suffering without (necessarily) eliminating emotional pain.
- Learning how to derive immense fulfillment from even tiny emotional pleasures.

The intermediate benefit is

- The clearing out of limiting forces from the past.

The long-term benefit is

- The literal spiritualization of all experience.

Specific Instructions

I gave Arianna the following specific instructions for working on her present traumatic emotions: Sit in a posture with your back straight. Maintain the straightness of your back through aligning the vertebra and through balance. Let the rest of your body sort of hang limp and loose from the central pillar of your spine. Let your jaw be loose, your shoulders hang. Try to keep your belly soft. In other words, I your posture should express two characteristics, *uprightness* and *settled-in-ness*. The uprightness will impart a quality of alertness and brightness to your consciousness. The settled-in-ness will impart a quality of gentleness and openness.

Now, bring all your attention to your body sensations. Let your mental images, internal conversations and the external sounds around you be in the background for a while. Focus as much as possible on body sensations. Some of those sensations may be of physical origin; some may be of emotional origin. Some may be pleasant; some may be unpleasant. Some of the sensations may be intense; some may be subtle. Try to greet whatever comes up in your body with gentle matter-of-factness. You will probably be acutely aware of the body sensations associated with the emotional trauma you've been through: rage, fear and such. It's challenging, but try to make friends with those sensations as *body events*. From time to time, you will probably get pulled away from body sensations into thought - mental images and internal conversations. As soon as you become aware that this has happened, gently return to your body sensations.

Throughout the work that we'll be doing, I'd like you to use your posture as a feedback device. Here's what I mean by that. If you get fuzzy or sleepy, straighten your spine a little. That will physiologically wake up your brain and bring you back to a state of alertness. If you start to tighten around the flow of experience, relax your whole body to whatever extent you can. This will help you get back to a state of openness. If you lie down at any point, you must make a strong resolve to remain crisp and alert. To insure that, you may have to keep your eyes open. Use the natural repose of the lying down posture to induce a state of openness over your whole body.

When Images Intrude

When Arianna called me back to report on her first ten minutes of working with her experience, she said "Things didn't go very well because I kept getting lost in the images." "That's entirely understandable," I responded. "So let's do some exploration. Each time you become aware of a mental picture, however vague or fleeting, I'd like you to say out loud the word *image*. When you're pulled to an image, that image may trigger a feeling in your body, for example, an image from the event may produce a sensation of anger, teary-ness, fear or aversion in your body. However, it is also possible that an image may arise but cause no feeling reaction in your body whatsoever. One thing we can say for sure though, each time you say *image*, that image either will or will not impact on your body. By impact I mean cause a sensation to

arise or intensify a sensation that's already there.

I continued to explain, "Each time you're pulled to an image and that image causes a change in your body, say out loud, *image with feeling*. Each time an image arises and it has no impact on your body say out loud, *image without feeling*. If for a moment you have no images just say, *no image*. After a few minutes, Arianna said that her images were triggered body feelings. "What flavors of feelings to the images produce?" I asked.

Flavors of Feeling

I define body flavor as "a distinct type or quality of sensation in the body." Basically flavors in your body field are analogous to colors in your visual field. People differ somewhat with regard to the visual colors they distinguish. In Japanese, they usually use the same word for green and blue, which we always distinguish in English. On the other hand, Latin distinguished two kinds of black, which English does not.

Arianna has described a well-localized teary-ness around her face and throat. She felt fear with a local epicenter in her belly and a subtle global spread throughout her whole body. She had a general shakiness that also affected her whole body but that could be distinguished flavor-wise from the fear, even though they largely overlapped spatially. She also had a distinct helplessness quality that affected her shoulders and extremities. The teary-ness and shakiness tended to be persistent in the background while the fear and helplessness were intensified each time an image came to her attention. Arianna had developed a precise sense of the **types** and **locations** of the feeling sensations in her body. She also discovered how new images induce or intensify body feelings. I suggested another exercise to focus on body sensations, one which keeps us from getting caught up in thought. Each time an image arises, focus on its body impact instead of the image itself. This generally helps people stay in the body and be less batted about the disturbing images. When this works, it increases concentration power and decreases the feeling of overwhelm. As always, each new sensation should be greeted with the gentle acceptance we call equanimity.

Gaining Equanimity

Arianna called me back to say that she was able easily to track each image and notice how, in a fraction of a second, it would have an impact on her body. When a person pours continuous attention on an experience, it sometimes falls into a cyclic rhythm. Whenever this happens, I consider it to be a window of opportunity presented by nature. Get into synch with the cycle. If you have some degree of equanimity, the rhythm can take you into a delicious timeless slow motion world! Here's the conversation I had with Arianna about her experience of the sensations triggered by her intrinsically painful images:

Shinzen: Are the images as frequent and intense as before?

Arianna: Yes, but I seem to be less caught up in them.

S: Okay. You're on the track of a valuable insight here. The visual thoughts have not changed in terms of their amount or content, yet you are less caught up in them. What do you think is responsible for the change?

A: Because I'm detaching the body feelings associated with the images.

S: You bet! But there's one other factor involved.

A: I have some degree of equanimity with them.

S: Exactly.

Now if someone were to ask you, "What does it mean to have equanimity with emotional pain like anger, fear or sadness?" how would you respond?

A: I'd say it's a kind of acceptance.

S: Yes. That's what I'd say too. But it's important to point out that what we're accepting here is the body sensations caused by a situation. We're not (necessarily) accepting the situation itself. This is the essential difference between equanimity and indifference.

We humans are constantly getting confused over this point. We think that if we totally open up to the subjective sensations created in us by people and situations, we will become vulnerable and ineffectual as a result. But that's profoundly untrue! Crime and injustice are, indeed, what we should vigorously oppose. The anger, fear and sadness flavors they induce in our bodies are parts of us that we need to embrace unconditionally. When we are able to do this, our actions and responses can be clarified through our mindfulness. When we are unable to do it, our actions and responses will be distorted by our emotions. Without such clarity, when we are in conflict with people and situations, we also unconsciously fight with the associated body sensations. This produces a kind of subtle self-interference deep within the core of our being. We are microscopically fighting with our own body feelings thousands of times a day without even realizing it.

This nano-level self-conflict is the essence of suffering. Unlearning it is the essence of equanimity.

The Fundamental Confusion

But it seems to me that if this confusion is so ubiquitous, there must be some compelling reason for it. Where does it come from? I'm not entirely sure, but I suspect it arises from many factors. Perhaps that's why it's so challenging to work through. I call it our fundamental confusion - the equating of total internal openness with total external helplessness. "If I really allow myself to feel my emotions, something bad will happen to me." Part of this confusion is no doubt related to unconscious associations and projections based on past experiences. By becoming aware of the subtle image and talk activity that links present body sensations to past events, you to open up to

sensation as pure present reality.

One of the reasons that body feelings have so much power over us is their ability to distort time - to convince the mind that there has never been, nor will there ever be anything, but *this*. If the body feelings relate to inappropriate or unproductive urges, this distortion can lead to uncontrollable compulsive behavior problems. If the body feelings are painful, this distortion can lead to a nightmarish perception of timeless torment, total panic...literal hell on earth.

How to get free? One way would be to develop so much mindfulness and equanimity that pain flavors automatically become purification flavors. This utterly uproots the time distortion effects of sensations. The gates of hell are sealed forever; the most one need fear are short trips to purgatory.

Watch a cat playing with a captured mouse. The cat lets the mouse escape then recaptures it over and over again. At some point the mouse goes limp and passive. I can't be sure, of course, but I suspect that at that moment, the mouse's little meridians pop wide open. It drops all internal friction. This is similar to the sudden onset of "super conductivity" in physical substances. After that the mouse probably suffers rather little from the fear and pain that are coursing through its body. It will sometimes look right into the eyes of the cat. Perhaps it is merging psychologically as a prelude to physical absorption. Total internal passivity is associated with total external passivity; the mouse *is* defenseless and ineffectual.

Perhaps deep within us, we have this primal intuition: "Total external helplessness will lead to radical internal openness." We also unknowingly make the inverse conclusion:

"Radical internal openness will lead to total external helplessness." This brings us to another one of nature's little ironies: by radically accepting animal-level sensations, we come to our full potential for rational human living.

My conjecture is that the fundamental confusion - "subjective openness = objective helplessness" - stems from diverse factors: associations from past personal experiences, the time-distorting power of sensations, and deep wiring from our animal ancestors. No wonder it is so difficult to become a person of complete feeling! As I pointed out, mindfulness skills impact on each of these factors in a distinct way. In particular, I suspect that the third factor can only be resolved through deep meditative states. On the other hand, Western psychotherapy has developed a raft of specialized tools for dealing with the first factor. That's one reason why psychotherapy can be helpful as a complement to meditation practice.

I like to use the analogy of high versus low definition on a computer monitor or a TV screen to illustrate another point about equanimity. On a high definition screen everything is clearer, richer, more alive, more...defined. Most people have rather low definition body awareness. They don't easily distinguish the qualities, shapes, and temporal patterns of body sensations. Specifically they often lack clarity around the

body feelings associated with moods, emotions, reactions and urges. There is a strong relationship between difficulty in distinguishing body states and difficulty dealing with emotions. And there is a strong relationship between difficulty dealing with emotions and difficulty dealing with life. Thus increasing the definition on one's "somatic screen" is an important aspect of developing mindfulness.

There are actually two reasons why people in general are out of touch with their subjective experiences: They have "low definition" bodies and they are continuously fixated in thought, especially verbal thought. Of course, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with thinking. Indeed complex thought is evolution's wonderful gift to humankind, giving our species special powers that the others lack. Thought per se is not the problem. The problem is the driven and fixated way in which we think. Fortunately, both low definition in the body and compulsive fixation in the mind can be remedied through systematic practice of mindfulness.

Learning Mindfulness

Over the years, I have trained many people to teach mindfulness skills. I call the people I train "facilitators" because they ease the way for nature to unfold. A facilitator is a kind of mindfulness midwife. One of the ways that I teach facilitators is through public demonstrations. I ask if anyone in the audience would like to do a session with me in front of the group. Those who volunteer do so with the understanding that as the session unfolds, I will be commenting to the group about their experience and my decision processes. Amazingly this commenting never seems to interfere with the volunteers' ability to concentrate or have a good experience. Watching real people work with real experiences in real time, combined with my comments and interpretations, makes for a very effective learning situation. The audience leaves with a tangible sense of how mindfulness, equanimity, and sensitivity to impermanence impact on specific experiences, what techniques work in what circumstances and how each new moment of subjective experience can be greeted skillfully. And the audience leaves inspired by what can be achieved by a combination of courageous intent and clever technique.