

CHAPTER 9

WORKING WITH THE MIND

You are the sky. Everything else — it's just the weather.

— PEMA CHÖDRÖN

VULNERABILITY AND COURAGE

DISTRESS IS THE ADMISSION PRICE TO THE PRESENT MOMENT, FOR it reveals areas of our psyche that are unloved. The wisest response to distress is compassion: the ability to be present without attachment to any outcome. Being open to the catastrophe, you can use compassion as a keel to right yourself. It's an amazing and gentle skill to completely show up in the present moment, open to the emotional material we try so hard to hold in check — the wounds of childhood, the messages that say we have not loved well or been worthy of love. After all, the love we fail to give in life becomes the pain we carry through it.

No wonder we spend most of our energy avoiding ourselves. What an irony, taking chemotherapy or radiation to fight for more moments of life, yet to avoid the moment we are in. This disease that threatens to take our days also amplifies the gift of them and insists we pay attention. But how can we do that without falling apart? The key seems a contradiction: to be both vulnerable and strong.

Vulnerability and courage. The two go hand in hand. Brené Brown,

points out in her TED Talk that “courage,” comes from the Latin *cor*, meaning “heart,” and the word originally meant to be able to tell your story with your whole heart, with total honesty.⁴⁶ This is different from bravery, the capacity to continue when you are afraid. Courage enables us to be kind to ourselves first, and that enables us to be compassionate with others. Courageous, vulnerable people believe that what made them vulnerable also made them beautiful. Vulnerability is necessary for there to be deep, authentic humanity.

Vulnerability is connected to shame. The more vulnerable we feel, the less we want to talk about it. Yet Brown discovered that those who have a wholehearted sense of worthiness, a strong sense of love and belonging, are able to be both vulnerable and strong at the same time. They are able to share this. Why? Because they believe they are worthy of love. This enables them to stand compassionately in the midst of their “weakness” and be authentic. In doing so, others perceive them not as weak but as incredibly, beautifully courageous. This is the goal at the end of life: not to be good, or to have it all together, but to be real. No self-deception. No need to hide from what is within. No need to suppress the truth of your experience. Brené Brown remarks, “Not only is vulnerability the core of shame and fear and struggle for worthiness, but it’s also the birthplace of joy, and creativity, of belonging, of love.”⁴⁷

THREE MINUTES

AN EXERCISE CAME TO ME THAT FACILITATES THE TUNING OF OUR SOULS toward love. I don’t recall if I thought of it, though it is so simple and naively optimistic that it likely came from me; however, I have seen it work so powerfully in even the most wounded individuals that I can only believe I inherited it from someone much wiser. Nonetheless, it is in my spiritual tool kit along with compassion, presence, vulnerability, meditation, sacraments, prayer, Therapeutic Touch, and counseling.

I introduce this with a warning: you will find this excruciating but only for a short while. Do this with someone you trust, because you’re going to be working with your vulnerability.

Set a timer to three minutes, sit and hold hands (that's optional), gaze into each other's eyes, and say nothing. During the three minutes, you are to be aware of everything that arises within you. Listen for the feelings that bubble and swirl. Locate them within your body. Feel their edges and how they have current, depth, and energy like flowing water. Be able to name the swirl of feelings. Be aware also of the thoughts that jump and dance in your head, leading you down paths and inviting you to attach to imagined streams and realities. Let all this happen, and stay with it!

Your assignment is to use the other person as an amplifier, to turn up the volume on your own noise, yet not abandon any aspect of your experience, no matter how emotional or painful, no matter how wonderful or intoxicating. (Yes, it can go in that direction, especially if you're sitting with someone you love and are grateful for.) Tears may well up, smiles may burst out, and giggles may percolate around controlled anxiety. Let it all happen, ride the wave of your experience, so that you may develop, over time, greater awareness of your own presence.

We are exercising the discipline of mindfulness so that you don't miss any moments of life. Even the ordinary ones are saturated with beauty. And the dark ones, they are saturated with more than growth. They are the doorways to your deepest and greatest potential, they are the avenues and detours on the road to self-awareness, and you can't go down those routes without becoming uncomfortable. A bad day for your ego is a great day for your soul. That's why this is best done with compassion and curiosity. Yes, the critical voice is guaranteed to butt in. Yes, you will edit, judge, and filter your thoughts and feelings, pouring yourself through the sieve of expectation. We all do this, so simply be aware of its happening.

I was so self-conscious the first time I did this! I worried about my crooked nose and then fixated on my partner's wrinkles. It took some practice to ease into what is unnatural in our culture: to stare into another's eyes. It can be perceived as downright rude, inappropriate, or even threatening. It's a daring move to hold one's gaze. In humans and animals alike, this is either a prelude to attack or seduction; either way, you

are consumed. So, take a deep breath while these ancestral instincts raise your blood pressure.

Notice the urge to look away, and if you do, simply reset the timer, recompose, and reconnect with your body. Breathe into it all. About the two-minute mark, you may find a shift in the quality of your presence. You may forget yourself in the other's eyes (always a beautiful experience), you may notice aches and pains, or you may want to run away. If that's the case, good — all the more material to work with! When the timer goes off, you can do whatever you want: grab a coffee, take a deep breath, cry and embrace, laugh like a child, or dash for the door. But I hope you will talk about it. Share how you shifted through that brief eternity. Train together every day (preferably when nothing else is pressing for your attention). And be excited about it, because you are learning how to connect with the most important person you could ever come to love — yourself.

Perhaps you don't have anyone to train with. One person asked me if she could do this with her cat. "No," I said. "You're guaranteed to lose that contest." (Yes, it does become a contest with a cat; they are superior in both the clarity of their intention and the consistency of their indifference to us. Dogs? They will have you grinning foolishly with licks and love so persuasive you'll happily remain on the surface where it's comfortable. Stick with your own species for this exercise. You can involve the four-legged varieties in the next one.) Even if you have no one available, you can still do this in a mirror. As three minutes tick by, you may find yourself gazing into a stranger's face. You may notice your pores, your wrinkles, and all the lovely imperfections that speak of your experience but make you reach for a mask. But we are here to take the mask off, so hold the gaze and listen with awareness and curiosity to all that arises within.

Interesting things happen when you compassionately show up to yourself. First, your distress rises. Then, with practice, it quickly shifts. You are changing the relationship to your own experience simply through the quality of your presence. By fully showing up, you are no longer straining against any aspect of yourself and are able to be someone more wonderful than a person who is keeping it all together: you are becoming

more authentic. More real. More loving. This is a theme you will encounter often in this book because it is, I suspect, the greatest goal of our spiritual journey.

It's also good for your immune system. A Harvard study on Mindfulness for Persons with Cancer and Terminal Illness found that simple compassionate exercises increased immune system proteins, lowered cortisol levels, and improved sleep.⁴⁸ Never think there is nothing you can do.

BECOMING A WARRIOR

YOU ARE BECOMING WHAT IS KNOWN IN BUDDHISM AS A “BODHISATTVA,” a warrior of compassion. I love this term, infused with both courage and vulnerability. It is the awakened mind, able to wholeheartedly stay with pain, suffering, anger, death, and not retaliate, judge, or change the outward circumstances. It is through softness and openness of presence that bodhisattvas transform the energy of limitation and despair. “Strong back, soft front” is their motto.

A story illustrates this. Once, there was a village overrun by a brutal warlord. In the modest temple at the center of the town, a monk sat in meditation. Suddenly, the doors burst open and a warrior charged in, screaming. The monk sat motionless and met the fiery gaze with a calm expression.

This caused the warrior to pause, then to scream, “Do you know who I am? I am one who can run you through with my sword without flinching!”

And the monk, after a pause, said with calm resolve, “Do you know who I am? I am one who can be run through with your sword without flinching.”

You may be thinking, “What good is this practice if the monk gets run through, anyway?” It's important to realize that you are both the monk and the warrior. Time and time again, we let the enraged, fearful side of us slaughter the vulnerable, noble side. The critical mind of reactivity and control is quick to take up the sword in defense of the ego (who we think we are, the role we play without knowing it). That fearful, desperate side of us will cling to life as we knew it, even after that life is radically changed.

This practice is powerfully fulfilled in the life of Jesus, who responded to the suffering around him with profound compassion, who reacted to the

betrayal of his friends and the brutality of his executioners with calm, loving awareness. The clarity of his connection to God provided an unshakable foundation from which he could encounter any experience as a true bodhisattva warrior. We see it in the Qur'an, which describes Allah as the Compassionate One. No other adjective is used so frequently to describe God in the Islamic text.⁴⁹ We see compassion in Judaism, in the central ethical mandate of *tikkun olam*, which means to repair the world. This Mishnah calls one to help beyond what is required, for in doing so, you restore a piece of the shattered divine spark. You are actually helping a wounded member of humanity remember their inherent dignity. You are honoring the light within them, even when they do not honor it themselves. What a transformation our world would undergo if we were to begin this sacred work, whatever our traditions or beliefs, by first honoring the sacredness of ourselves. This was the homework of one patient who discovered, through a single sentence, how he could guide his heart in the path to becoming a warrior of compassion.

MIKE

MIKE HAD JUST COMPLETED TREATMENT FOR PROSTATE CANCER. A DIVORCE and estrangement from his children marked the prelude to his diagnosis, and now, after a successful course of radiation and surgery, he was struggling with ongoing fatigue and unrealistic expectations of himself. The gift of life he had fought for was turning out to be a test of endurance against fates that conspired to destroy every good thing he had ever known. His sexual functioning had been drastically affected by the procedures as well (erections often are no longer possible after prostate surgery). He spent the days sleeping and the evenings drinking. He had lost himself as well as those he loved.

I asked him what he wanted from our conversations and what he wanted from life. His answer was poignant: "I want to come back to myself, to the man I know I can be. I don't want to spiral into a dark place of bitterness and regret. I want to be happy again."

We first discussed his attachments, including the attachment to that

goal. Happiness is a byproduct of being authentic in relationships, starting with the relationship you have with yourself. His struggles were numerous, and I was only able to see him for short-term therapy. How could we awaken compassion in such a short time against such challenges? He needed a tool, and it needed to be a simple one. I paused before speaking, praying silently for the words to come. “I’m going to give you a sentence I want you to say before you take any action, whether that be making yourself a meal, or going to work, or calling your children. Say this silently to yourself as a meditation, and let it guide you in all your decisions, all your thoughts and perceptions. If you are being true to this sentence, then you will feel it in your heart as a growing peace and agreement. Your thoughts, words, and actions will align. If you are not being true to this sentence, then you will instinctively know that, too. Part of you will resist, rationalize, and react to it. Say this sentence with your heart, with your body, as well as your mind. Here is the sentence: “This is how I love.”

Mike sat silently as he rolled the words over in his mind. An eyebrow raised, he repeated the words, but interestingly, shifted them, revealing the instinctive resistance we all have to empowerment: “How should I love?”

“Notice what happened there?” I asked with excitement. “Did you see what happened? You changed it from an affirmation to an inquiry. All the power disappears. Say it out loud, ‘This is how I love.’ You’re rising in the morning, ‘This is how I love.’ You’re making yourself breakfast, ‘This is how I love.’ You’re talking to your kids, ‘This is how I love.’ You’re grieving your divorce, and feeling alone and frustrated, reaching for a drink, ‘This is how I love.’ What happens when you say it, silently in your heart? Feel the truth of it, and if love is not there, let it guide you to choose in ways that make it so.”

Mike began to cry. He began to sob and crumple in the chair. “But I don’t! I don’t love! I fight and control and do anything I can not to be afraid.” He cried with a release of pain he had defended for months. With that sentence, Mike compassionately opened to the wounded part of himself, and his healing journey began. It was not a journey he could do alone, so I connected him to Alcoholics Anonymous, he accessed a cancer support

program, and most importantly, he reconciled with his children. We never discussed religion, faith, or God, yet we both knew he was on the way to healing his soul. Bodhisattva, Christ consciousness, *tikkun olam*, the Compassionate One. A small part of the world being restored.

ATTACHMENT AND LOSS

BUDDHIST NUN PEMA CHÖDRÖN MAKES HER HOME, I AM FORTUNATE TO say, just a few hours from mine, at Gampo Abbey, in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. With humor and insight, she helps people explore how every loss is a challenge as to who we think we are and who we actually are. Every loss is a lesson in *shenpa*, a Tibetan term that means attachment. More accurately, it means “that which has its hooks in you.” As she explains, this internal hook is felt most acutely when our buttons are pushed: “Somebody says a mean word to you and then something in you tightens — that’s the *shenpa*. Then it starts to spiral into low self-esteem, or blaming them, or anger at them, denigrating yourself. And maybe if you have strong addictions, you just go right for your addiction to cover over the bad feeling that arose when that person said that mean word to you. This is a mean word that gets you, hooks you. Another mean word may not affect you but we’re talking about where it touches that sore place — that’s a *shenpa*.”⁵⁰

You know the feeling, the sudden emotion that chokes your coping and composure. It’s the desperate urge to change the topic, to run from an abrupt sense of groundlessness and unease. *Shenpa* leaves you disoriented when you unexpectedly run into an old lover, when your wife or boss or friend says something that strikes a nerve, when you have the carpet ripped out from under you through a diagnosis.

You also know the reaction: the instinct to flee from it, fix it, or medicate it. Our escape plans are habitual: alcohol, food, sex, cigarettes, defensiveness, hostility, withdrawal, sleepiness, inappropriate behavior, giddiness, even telltale speech patterns and voice tones. Often our senses become blunted or exaggerated in an attempt to filter what we are experiencing. The classic example is receiving bad news. I recall one family member who became more cheery and attentive to everyone’s needs, as if hosting

a party, whenever the reality of the patient's suffering was addressed. She clearly was uncomfortable and unable to handle the complex emotions she was feeling. This was her way of protecting herself, but it was also how her emotional pain was controlling her.

Understanding why we react in such a way can help to temper our distressing feelings and behavior, to bring them under control through working with our own thoughts with compassion and awareness. We don't have to believe everything we think. We don't have to become victims. Identifying with the accusations is the attachment. What we must strive for is non-attachment, to distance ourselves from a knee-jerk reaction when we feel provoked or overwhelmed, in order to make a more balanced assessment. Emotions are part of human nature and, to a large extent, dictate our choices. The challenge is to identify the rogue reaction and to use its energy to return to a compassionate stance.

Curiosity is a wonderful tool when dealing with *shenpa*. With curiosity we can notice our anger, our joy, our grief, and ask, What's this about? What does this tell me about what I value, what I feel I am to lose or gain about who I think I am? What does this say about my life? Through curiosity we can dance with anger, grief, even death, and realize that, through this inquiry, we are stepping back from the experience rather than identifying with it. We are practicing a second Buddhist approach to suffering: *vipassana*, which means "to witness." In this meditation, one moves into the experience of attachment and suffering with the mantra, I have this body, but I am not this body. I have this thought, but I am not this thought. I have this feeling, but I am not this feeling. I am the witness.

I use this myself, for the intensity of my work will often trigger my own tears. It reminds me of the shortest passage in the Gospels, one that demonstrates a model of vulnerability and strength. It's from John 11:35, in which Christ comes to the grave of his friend Lazarus. It simply says, "Jesus wept." When I feel that rise in me, instead of suppressing it, I breathe into it as solidarity with the other person. To abandon any part of your own experience is to pull away from what is. Counselors must be present to the nuances of their own distress and move with the current of it.

Besides, supporting a person's grief without thinking it's going to affect you is like moving through water thinking you won't get wet. Identifying with another's distress is both the affliction of compassion and its greatest gift.

Who'd have thought such a simple tool could reveal that you are more than your mind. While the practice certainly helps me be fully present with suffering, I always marvel how *vipassana* brings patients back to their essential core and enables them to go beyond surviving, even to use cancer for the acceleration of their spiritual journey.