

Responding to Emotional or Physical Pain

Blocking / Drowning / Letting Go / Turning Toward

by Dave Potter

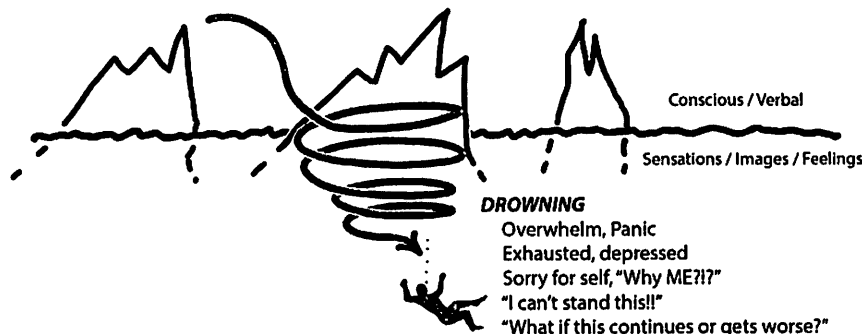
The two most typical responses to significant pain, whether primarily physical or emotional, are **Blocking** and **Drowning**. In "**Blocking**", we push away or deny our discomfort by numbing or pushing through it using force of will, by distracting ourselves or staying busy, convincing ourselves we don't have a problem, and/or by self-medicating with food, alcohol, or drugs. This "solution" is problematic in itself and is ultimately unsatisfactory, not just because of unwanted side-effects of our solution, but because nothing has been done to resolve the underlying cause of the pain:



BLOCKING

Eat, Drink, Medicate
 Get Busy, Push Through
 Tense against the discomfort
 Anxious, brittle, impatient
 "I'm not going to let this stop me..."

The second most typical response, "**Drowning**", is not a conscious choice, but the effect of not having sufficient resources to deal with the painful condition. In Drowning, we are consumed by the difficulty: overwhelmed with the discomfort and its associated fears and/or judgments. Accompanying the physical and/or emotional pain often come feelings of helplessness and judgment ("I can't stand this!", "What if this continues or gets worse?", "How could they/I have been so stupid?!?", etc.). In the end, we can find ourselves feeling hopeless and powerless about how to take care of our own pain.

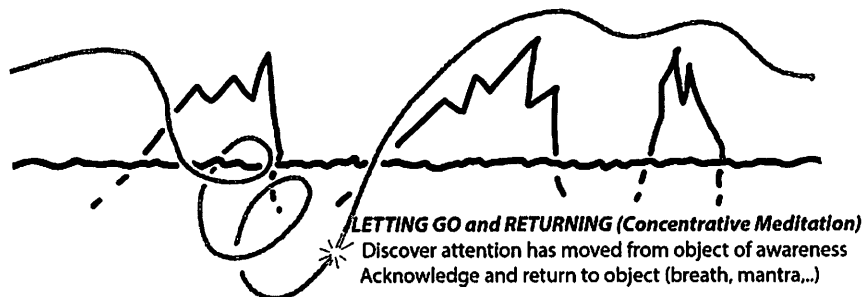


DROWNING

Overwhelm, Panic
 Exhausted, depressed
 Sorry for self, "Why ME?!?"
 "I can't stand this!!"
 "What if this continues or gets worse?"

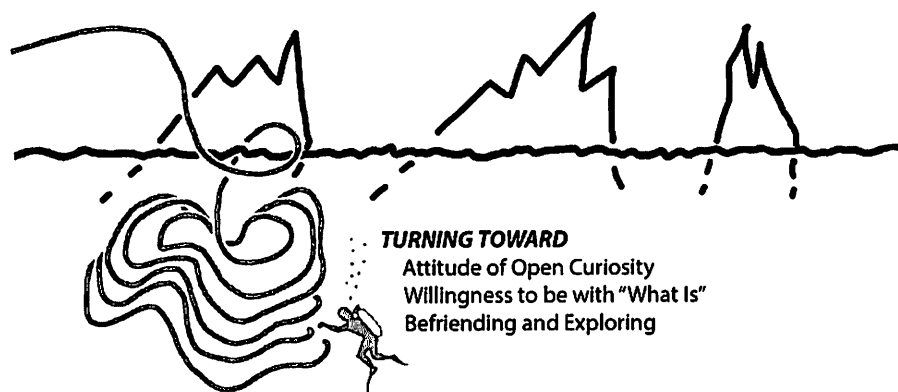
Often, it's not just blocking or drowning, but a swinging from one to the other. For instance, after a period of overwhelm (*drowning*), there can be a retreat into eating or self-medicating (*blocking*), which is only effective temporarily, after which another round of overwhelming emotion begins (*drowning*), and when that gets to be too much, there's escape with distraction (*blocking*), and so on. This can be a never-ending cycle.

So far in this course, when some difficulty presents itself during meditation in the form of a thought, emotion, or physical sensation, we simply acknowledge it and then “firmly but gently” return to the object of awareness (for instance, breath in the sitting meditation). This is similar to other meditative disciplines such as TM (Transcendental Meditation) or Christian centering prayer, where there is a return to silently repeating the mantra or prayer when something interrupts it. For the purposes of our illustration, we could call this “*Letting Go and Returning*”:



This approach strengthens grounding, stability and resilience, and can lead to very pleasant, even blissful states of absorption. And if the acknowledgment is done in a truly non-reactive way, and with a brief excursion exploring the difficult area, the difficulty may actually shift or dissolve. But if it is a long-standing pattern, the underlying dynamics remain in place, to be encountered at another time, strong as ever.

There is another approach, which we’ll call “*Turning Toward*”. This is a powerful method, but it is deeply counter-intuitive, because the last thing we think we want to do is to move closer to what’s been troubling us. Instead of moving away from the difficulty that has arisen, we move toward it. Although such an exploration might sound scary and uncomfortable, this is a gentle process, and is done in a special way, one that draws on the skills of awareness and non-judgment that you have been strengthening so far in this course.



In “*Turning Toward*”, there is an attitude of open curiosity and a willingness to be with and explore what is being encountered, even if it is uncomfortable. A surprising and counter-intuitive result of staying with something in this way is that the “I’ve got to get out of here” component of the discomfort lessens, and sometimes even disappears, even while staying in contact with it, and a successful encounter of this type can sometimes unravel long-standing problematic patterns.

“Turning Toward” difficult emotions or sensations in a way that is non-reactive and productive is an art in itself and merits some study and practice. Of course, it’s not always possible in terms of timing and setting to engage in this kind of exploration, and it may be appropriate, if possible, to set aside the difficult sensation or emotion, until there is time and there are resources to deal with the difficulty (which might be a healthy form of “blocking”).

The “Turning Toward” meditations and informal practices described in the course are an adaptation of Vidyamala Burch’s “Five-Step” model, and they guide you in explorations of physical and emotional difficulties in a way that brings in personal resources to help keep you grounded as you practice this approach.

There are a number of other approaches which involve a “turning toward” our inner landscape, including RAIN (as taught by Tara Brach), Soften-Soothe-Allow (as taught by Kristin Neff), and Focusing (as taught by Ann Weiser Cornell). Of all of these methods, the most sophisticated and complete method I know of is Focusing. It is well worth learning and Ann has some great resources, including some excellent online trainings. Becoming completely comfortable and skilled with Focusing takes significant time and work, but if you are interested in exploring it, see Inner Listening: An Introduction to Focusing.



“Turning Toward” Difficult Emotions

(Option 1 for the Week 5 informal practice)

Do the guided Turning Toward Meditation at least once before doing this practice on your own.

This is similar to “STOP” (One Minute Breathing Space), except that in the middle, there is an intentional exploration of an emotional difficulty.

Beginning with Awareness and Grounding

Bring yourself into the present moment, grounding yourself by physically sensing into the support provided by the ground or floor beneath your feet, or what you are sitting or lying on. Then gently direct full attention to breathing for a few breaths, feeling each inbreath and outbreath.

Turning toward the Difficult (softening, allowing)

What would you call this feeling you are having? Anger? Fear? Sadness? Impatience? Confusion? If, for example, it was anger, rather than saying “I am angry or I am frustrated or I am sad” about something, see how it feels to say “I’m noticing something *in me* that is this way, that is angry or afraid or sad.” “I’m noticing something *in me* that has this feeling”. This gives the feeling more room to move and you won’t identify with it as much. This way, you’re not labeling yourself as angry or fearful, you’re merely aware you have those feelings right now.

Now, see if you can notice where in the body there might be a physical reaction to this. It could be a tightening in the shoulders or chest, tightness or queasiness in the stomach, pressure or tension of some sort, achiness, constriction, tension in the throat, heat in face, tightness in the jaw, just seeing where it affects you physically. Or if you can’t find a specific place, there may be a general sense of unease you feel all over. Allow what you are noticing to just be there, simply acknowledging it, letting your awareness gently rest there, allowing it to be just the way it is.

See if you can *soften* your reaction to the difficulty, to this situation, with gentle breaths, seeing if you can be with it the same way you’d be with a child or a pet whom you love and who is in distress. You might even place your hand where in the body you’re physically feeling the difficulty the most, *or*, on your heart or belly, meeting this experience with kindness, recognizing that this would be difficult or painful or challenging for anybody, holding it and yourself gently and with compassion.

This is *softening and allowing*. Softening of your reaction to the feeling that you’re having, allowing that reaction to be there, all the while knowing that allowing it to be there doesn’t mean that you like it, it’s simply an acknowledgment that this *is* what you are feeling right now.

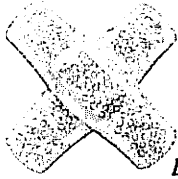
Seeking the Pleasant

Without trying to push the difficult issue away, see if you can find somewhere in your life where things are generally okay, or maybe even good, something or someone you are grateful for. It could have to do with a loved one, a favorite pet, past or present, a good friend, maybe an achievement in the past or present, or a hobby or sport that gives you pleasure and satisfaction... or a quality or strength that you have and are rightfully proud of... it could even be something as simple as recalling a smile or a kind word someone had for you recently or in the past...

Broadening Awareness & Opening to the Outside World

In this step, you broaden your awareness, like panning out with a wide-angle lens, including both what you’re grateful for and the difficulty you began with. You are creating enough space and room for both, without pushing away the difficult or clinging to the pleasant, shifting to an even wider, more inclusive perspective, including the entire body and all of its sensations.

Bring into your awareness the room or area you are in, letting your attention now move to the outside world, taking in the sights, sounds, and sensations around you, and when you’re ready, re-engage with the activities of your day.



“Turning Toward” Physical Pain

(Option 2 for the Week 5 informal practice)

Do the guided Turning Toward Meditation at least once before doing this practice on your own.

This is similar to “STOP” (One Minute Breathing Space), except that in the middle, there is an intentional exploration of physical discomfort.

Beginning with Awareness and Grounding

Bring yourself into the present moment, grounding yourself by physically sensing into the support provided by the ground or floor beneath your feet, or what you are sitting or lying on. Then gently direct full attention to breathing for a few breaths, feeling each inbreath and outbreath.

Turning toward the Difficult (softening, allowing)

How would you describe the sensation? See if you can do this without calling it “pain” and be as specific as possible. For instance, is it sharp, cutting, dull and throbbing, burning, tight, achy? How big is this area of discomfort? How thick or thin is it? What texture would you say it had? What is its shape? Where are the boundaries? Spend a moment at the boundaries, beyond which there’s less or no discomfort. See if you can let the area just beyond the edge soften or relax, without trying to change the area of discomfort itself, just putting your attention at the edges, letting there be a softening there...

See if you can identify the feeling you have about this physical condition. Is there Anger? Does it feel unfair? Is there Fear that it might not get better, or that it will get worse? Sadness about how it’s limiting you? Impatience? Confusion? Use your own words to describe this feeling.

See if you can *soften* your reaction to the difficulty, with gentle breaths, seeing if you can be with it the same way you’d be with a child or a pet whom you love and who is in distress. You might even place your hand where in the body you’re physically feeling the difficulty the most, *or*, on your heart or belly, meeting this experience with kindness, recognizing that this would be difficult or painful or challenging for anybody, holding it and yourself gently and with compassion.

This is *softening and allowing*. Softening of your reaction to the feeling that you’re having, allowing that reaction to be there, all the while knowing that allowing it to be there doesn’t mean that you like it, it’s simply an acknowledgment that this *is* what you are feeling right now.

Seeking the Pleasant

Without trying to push the difficult sensations away, scan your body for an area that’s not in pain, seeing if you can find neutral or even pleasurable sensations, as if you are an explorer looking for hidden treasure. It could be a sense of warmth in your hands, a pleasant tingling somewhere in your body, maybe a sense of release as you sink into your support, or maybe you’re just now noticing your right big toe or lower arm is pain-free. If you’re having difficulty finding someplace that feels okay, you might gently place your hand somewhere, for instance, on your shoulder or chest or head, the way you might to comfort someone you cared about, and if that touch felt comforting, sensing into that area. Or, you might find something that’s beautiful or pleasant in your immediate environment, like a plant, or a ray of sunlight, a piece of art, or a photo.

Broadening Awareness & Opening to the Outside World

In this step, you broaden your awareness, like panning out with a wide-angle lens, including both pleasant and painful areas. You are creating enough space and room for both, without pushing away the painful or clinging to the pleasant, shifting to an even wider, more inclusive perspective, including the entire body and all of its sensations.

Bring into your awareness the room or area you are in, letting your attention now move to the outside world, taking in the sights, sounds, and sensations around you, and when you’re ready, re-engage with the activities of your day.

Radical Acceptance

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The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change. – Carl Rogers

Mohini was a regal white tiger who lived for many years at the Washington, DC. National Zoo. For most of those years her home was in the old lion house—a typical twelve-by-twelve-foot cage with iron bars and a cement floor. Mohini spent her days pacing restlessly back and forth in her cramped quarters. Eventually, biologists and staff worked together to create a natural habitat for her. Covering several acres, it had hills, trees, a pond and a variety of vegetation. With excitement and anticipation they released Mohini into her new and expansive environment. But it was too late. The tiger immediately sought refuge in a corner of the compound, where she lived for the remainder of her life. Mohini paced and paced in that corner until an area twelve by twelve feet was worn bare of grass.

Perhaps the biggest tragedy in our lives is that freedom is possible, yet we can pass our years trapped in the same old patterns. Entangled in the trance of unworthiness, we grow accustomed to caging ourselves in with self-judgment and anxiety, with restlessness and dissatisfaction. Like Mohini, we grow incapable of accessing the freedom and peace that are our birthright. We may want to love other people without holding back, to feel authentic, to breathe in the beauty around us, to dance and sing. Yet each day we listen to inner voices that keep our life small. Even if we were to win millions of dollars in the lottery or marry the perfect person, as long as we feel not good enough, we won't be able to enjoy the possibilities before us. Unlike Mohini, however, we can learn to recognize when we are keeping ourselves trapped by our own beliefs and fears. We can see how we are wasting our precious lives.

The way out of our cage begins with accepting absolutely everything about ourselves and our lives, by embracing with wakefulness and care our moment-to-moment experience. By accepting absolutely everything, what I mean is that we are aware of what is happening within our body and mind in any given moment, without trying to control or judge or pull away. I do not mean that we are putting up with harmful behavior—our own or another's. This is an inner process of accepting our actual, present-moment experience. It means feeling sorrow and pain without resisting. It means feeling desire or dislike

for someone or something without judging ourselves for the feeling or being driven to act on it.

Clearly recognizing what is happening inside us, and regarding what we see with an open, kind and loving heart, is what I call Radical Acceptance. If we are holding back from any part of our experience, if our heart shuts out any part of who we are and what we feel, we are fueling the fears and feelings of separation that sustain the trance of unworthiness. Radical Acceptance directly dismantles the very foundations of this trance.

Radical Acceptance flies in the face of our conditioned reactions. When physical or emotional pain arises, our reflex is to resist it not only by stiffening our body and contracting our muscles, but also by contracting our mind. We lose ourselves in thoughts about what is wrong, how long it will last, what we should do about it and how the pain reflects our unworthiness. A physical pain, such as a backache or a migraine, might turn into a commentary on how we don't know how to take care of ourselves, how we don't eat well or exercise enough. The pain might make us feel like a victim; it might tell us we can't count on our body, that things will always go wrong. In the same way, we amplify emotional pain with our judgments and stories. Feeling fear or anger or jealousy means something is wrong with us, that we are weak or bad...

The wing of clear seeing is often described... as mindfulness. This is the quality of awareness that recognizes exactly what is happening in our moment-to-moment experience. When we are mindful of fear, for instance, we are aware that our thoughts are racing, that our body feels tight and shaky, that we feel compelled to flee—and we recognize all this without trying to manage our experience in any way, without pulling away. Our attentive presence is unconditional and open—we are willing to be with whatever arises, even if we wish the pain would end or that we could be doing something else. That wish and that thought become part of what we are accepting. Because we are not tampering with our experience, mindfulness allows us to see life "as it is." This recognition of the truth of our experience is intrinsic to Radical Acceptance: We can't honestly

accept an experience unless we see clearly what we are accepting.

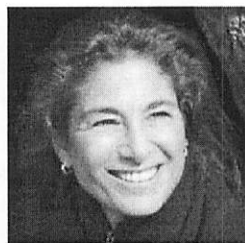
The second wing of Radical Acceptance, compassion, is our capacity to relate in a tender and sympathetic way to what we perceive. Instead of resisting our feelings of fear or grief, we embrace our pain with the kindness of a mother holding her child. Rather than judging or indulging our desire for attention or chocolate or sex, we regard our grasping with gentleness and care. Compassion honors our experience; it allows us to be intimate with the life of this moment as it is. Compassion makes our acceptance whole-hearted and complete.

The two wings of clear seeing and compassion are inseparable; both are essential in liberating us from the trance. They work together, mutually reinforcing each other. If we are rejected by someone we love, the trance of unworthiness may ensnare us in obsessive thinking, blaming the one who hurt us and at the same time believing that we were jilted because we are defective. We may feel caught in a relentless swing between explosive anger and wrenching grief and shame. The two wings of Radical Acceptance free us from this swirling vortex of reaction. They help us find the balance and clarity that can guide us in choosing what we say or do...

We might wonder how, when we feel most stuck, we take the first step toward Radical Acceptance. It can give us confidence to remember that... our essence remains intact, no matter how lost we may be. The very nature of our awareness is to know what is happening. The very nature of our heart is to care. Like a boundless sea, we have the capacity to

embrace the waves of life as they move through us. Even when the sea is stirred up by the winds of self-doubt, we can find our way home. We can discover, in the midst of the waves, our spacious and wakeful awareness.

We lay the foundations of Radical Acceptance by recognizing when we are caught in the habit of judging, resisting and grasping, and how we constantly try to control our levels of pain and pleasure. We lay the foundations of Radical Acceptance by seeing how we create suffering when we turn harshly against ourselves, and by remembering our intention to love life. As we let go of our stories of what is wrong with us, we begin to touch what is actually happening with a clear and kind attention. We release our plans or fantasies and arrive openhanded in the experience of this moment. Whether we feel pleasure or pain, the wings of acceptance allow us to honor and cherish this ever-changing life, as it is.



Tara Brach is the senior teacher and founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington. Tara is the author of *Radical Acceptance* and *True Refuge*.

The “Felt Sense” Prayer
Author unknown – as shared by Tara Brach

I am the pain in your head, the knot in your stomach, the unspoken grief in your smile.

I'm your high blood pressure, your elevated blood pressure, your fear of challenge, your lack of trust.

I'm your hot flashes, your fragile low back, your agitation, and your fatigue.

You tend to disown me, suppress me, ignore me, inflate me, coddle me, condemn me. You usually want me to go away immediately, to disappear, just back into obscurity. More times than not, I'm only the most recent notes of a long symphony, the most evident branches of roots that have been challenged for seasons.

So, I implore you. I am a messenger with good news, as disturbing as I can be at times. I am wanting to guide you back to those tender places in yourself, the place where you can hold yourself with compassion and honesty. I may ask you to alter your diet, get more sleep, exercise regularly, breathe more consciously.

I might encourage you to seek a vaster reality and worry less about the day-to-day fluctuations of life. I may ask you to explore the bonds and the wounds of your relationship. Wherever I lead you, my hope is that you will realize that success will not be measured by my eradication, but by the shift in the internal landscape from which I emerge.

I am your friend, not your enemy. I belong. I have no desire to bring pain and suffering into your life. I'm simply tugging at your sleeve, too long immune to gentle nudges. I desire for you to allow me to speak to you in a way that enlivens your higher instincts for self-care.

My charge is to energize you, to listen to me with the sensitive ear and heart of a mother attending to her precious baby. You are a being so vast, so complex with amazing capacities for self-regulation and healing.

Let me be one of the harbingers that lead you to the mysterious core of your being, where insight and wisdom are naturally available when called upon with a sincere heart.