

LOVING, KNOWING, AND GROWING

A Conversation: Part 1

Tami Simon [00:00:11]

Welcome, everyone, to this special conversation on loving, knowing, and growing, with three leading teachers of our time - Tara Brach, Joseph Goldstein, and Rick Hanson. My name's Tami Simon, I'm the founder of Sounds True, and I'm here in the Sounds True studio.

And it is a great joy, an honor, to be able to host this conversation. Tara Brach is with us from Great Falls, Virginia. Joseph from Barre, Massachusetts. And Rick from San Rafael, California. Let's get started.

Rick, you had the initial vision for this series, so I'm going to kick it off with you here. Share a little bit why these three particular skills - loving, knowing, and growing - why it was important to you to bring these three skills together into one teaching series?

Rick Hanson [00:01:10]

I've had a lifelong interest in practice. What do we do with what's appearing inside our own mind or out in the world? Practice gives us a shock absorber so that we're not swept away by external events or our internal reactions. And practice is what helps us be resourceful, dealing with changing conditions, and also gives us more that we can offer to others.

It's interesting, sometimes people can think of practice as some sort of yuppie luxury item to be engaged once a year at yoga camp. But actually, the worse someone's life is, the harder it is, and the less they're being supported by the world, the more they're being mistreated by the world - including in structural forms of oppression - actually, the more important it is to practice and to develop the capacity to practice. So that's kind of a frame for practice altogether. And then what does practice consist of?

There are different angles on this, but in a kind of simple, direct way, it seems to me that practice has three fundamental elements to it:

First, when something happens, let's say that someone is mean to you, or lets you down, or is hurtful in some way, or something happens that you have reactions to... there, as part of a practice key element, is a feeling of supportiveness toward yourself, because if you don't have that fundamental stance of support toward yourself, why should you practice at all? Why do anything you can? So there needs to be that quality of warmth for oneself. Often there are related factors of compassion, sometimes something more muscular, a sense of being on your

own side. You know, there's that initial feeling of, "ouch, this hurts. I wish I weren't suffering." It's very fundamental and visceral.

Also in practice is a quality of observing one's reactions and also observing the outer world - awareness. A kind of stability of awareness, a steadiness of presence so that we're not completely swept away by things. And with this stability of presence often comes a kind of inquiry. A kind of investigation, "Huh. What's going on? Why has this bothered me so much? What's the underlying hurt that rests beneath anger? What's happening here?"

And then third, as we practice, hopefully we're learning something. We're growing in some way from what we're experiencing. What's the takeaway here? What's the lesson for me to learn about myself or other people? What can I develop through this experience that I'm having, including developing qualities inside myself that I can draw on down the road for practicing tomorrow, or next year, or during the last year of my own life, kind of like a handoff to myself in the future.

So to me, that's the essence of it all. And I think that in life, you know, in the world of people who do practice, sometimes you can see that these three aspects, kind of like the three legs of the stool, are more developed than others. In other words, I think of them as, like I said, a three-legged stool: loving, knowing, and growing.

And I've known people who are really good at the loving aspect, compassion, kindness aspect, who aren't very mindful. I've also known people who are very mindful and didn't have a very warm heart, including toward themselves. And also, I've known people who we're quite mindful and compassionate, but they didn't have much of a learning curve, their healing curve, their development curve, their cultivation curve was really, really pretty flat. So I'm really happy to have the opportunity to explore all three of these and how they fit together.

Tami Simon [00:05:04]

Just a couple of more questions here, Rick. Right at the outset, you said that you've had this lifelong interest in practice. What do you mean by the word practice?

Rick Hanson [00:05:14]

Yeah, it's what I said, it's how we relate to or engage inside our own mind. And I'm pointing at my head, but really, I could point at my heart and really the whole body. It's how we relate to the experiences we're having or how we relate to events and in our relationship to them, how we cope with them, how we adapt. You know, I started out as just a grumpy, unhappy, suffering kid and gradually learned how to practice with my own reactions to the world around me. And

then as a psychologist, over time, as a therapist, you know, I make my living in some ways trying to help people practice themselves and get better with practicing over time.

Tami Simon [00:06:03]

And this notion of the three legs of the stool - loving, growing, knowing - is this based on some type of traditional teaching?

Rick Hanson [00:06:13]

It's interesting. So I come at this number one, as a guy who suffered a lot and who's wanted to practice, and also as a clinical psychologist trained in Western psychology, and also as really kind of a lifelong Buddhist, especially grounded in the earliest teachings of the Buddha, rooted in the earliest surviving record of those teachings. And whether it's in the formal world of clinical psychology, or the self-help human potential transformation territory - where I've drunk a lot of that Kool-Aid, too - or in the Pali canon - the record of the Buddhist teachings - and even in the later developments of Buddhism as well as in other spiritual traditions, you find these three elements again and again and again.

And in Pali, the language of early Buddhism, they could be described as Metta for kindness, Sati for Mindfulness, and Bhavana for cultivation. So these qualities are definitely explored thoroughly in the Buddhist tradition as well as in other places, and often you'll find them implicitly mentioned or talked about in relationship with each other. But to my knowledge, we don't typically find them explored in an integrated way, including in both Western psychology as well as in the contemplative traditions.

All three come together. They all support each other. They're all intertwined. And when we're actually practicing, they kind of mush together. That said, it's useful, I think, when we learn things and we get better at them to tease them apart into their different elements. So when I thought to myself, "who do I know who really, really exemplifies loving, compassion, kindness, including engagement with the world?" Tara Brach came to my mind. And then I thought, "who really embodies and knows deeply knowing, mindfulness, witnessing, and including the development of mindfulness and forms of concentration. Joseph Goldstein." Both of you I consider to be friends as well as my teachers, and I'm so pleased that we're doing this together.

Tami Simon [00:08:29]

And with that, Tara, I'd love to have you join our conversation as our loving expert, so to speak. Sometimes I know Rick describes loving as warm-heartedness and I love that phrase. And to

begin, I'd love to know if you were to give people some pith instructions, so to speak - with all of your work on radical acceptance and radical compassion - pith instructions for living and practicing more warm-heartedness. What would those be?

Tara Brach [00:09:06]

Well, first, I love that term, too, because it brings us right into our bodies and into the moment and I just want to name in this moment, I'm really sensing, listening to Rick, how much of a weave this is and how powerful it is to feel it as a weave of these three elements, and also sense that the elements themselves. The first pith instruction that comes to mind for me is intention. The Buddha taught that everything arises from the tip of intention, and there's a wonderful teaching that the most important thing is remembering the most important thing. And when we know that loving matters, it matters because it's this essence expression of who we are. Then we get resolved then, and that starts moving us towards whatever the practices are, the environments and so on that help us to wake it up. So that would be the first pith instruction is to...

I sometimes think of it as taking that end of life perspective. You know, if we're at the end of our lives looking back, what would really matter? And so many of us really would go right to that today, I lived that that love was an expression of really my being. So that's the first one.

The second one - and this comes right to warm-heartedness - is to have the courage to feel our feelings, because we're just incredibly dissociated. And most of us spend a huge amount of time in that kind of virtual reality of thinking. And in order to experience love, we have to experience in our bodies to feel compassion. We have to feel that tenderness. Otherwise, it's abstract. Like we can hear about something going on in the world and say, "oh, that sounds terrible," but it's like our hearts aren't resonating in a real tender way, and we won't be moved in some way to reach out. So this is the second pith instruction is to come into our bodies. Be willing to feel what's here. And it's challenging because that means feeling the rawness, the difficulty. But if we're not willing to feel that, we don't get to feel that presence and warmth and tenderness that comes with open-heartedness. So that would be the second one.

And one of the images that for me goes with that came from David Lawrence because he talks about how, he says that, 'Vitality, the human race is dying. It's like this great uprooted tree with the roots in the air.' And what we need to do is replant ourselves in the universe, come back to the earth of our bodies and being. So that's the second pith instruction: be here, feel.

And the third is to actively express our care. We hold back our love. I mean, we're scared. We're scared of each other. We're scared of being rejected. So we hold back. So this is very much a part of the classic Buddhist teachings on Metta, lovingkindness, that it's not just a kind of

reflection, but there's a sense of an offering it out. And that's what mobilizes and really brings it alive.

And for you listening, you know that if you actually say the words, "I love you" and you mean it, it actually brings alive the loving feeling even more. So the third: say it out loud. Don't hold back. Or express it in some way.

And then the fourth is that loving is by nature all-inclusive. Very, very powerful teaching for me is that the boundary to what we accept, or the boundary to our compassion really is the boundary to our freedom. And then unconditional loving really means all beings, all beings are included. And just to say this is really the trajectory in a societal way, that for us to find some peace on earth, the trajectory is to widen those circles to be more and more inclusive of all beings everywhere. So those would be the four.

Tami Simon [00:13:33]

Beautiful. And just to say for a moment, shout out of love to all of our listeners, and to Rick for coming up with the idea for the series. And I'm following your third instruction, Tara, I can't help myself, and for you for coming on and being our loving teacher. And here, Joseph, when it comes to - Rick mentioned Metta, Sati and Bhavana - and when it comes to Sati, this word for knowing or mindfulness., you're the man. So first of all, I love you. Thank you for coming on and teaching on this, with Sounds True. You published a thirty-two part lecture series on the Satipattana Sutta. You wrote the book on it called Mindfulness: A Guide to Awakening. So talk to us a little bit about Sati and your version of pith instructions for living with Sati.

Joseph Goldstein [00:14:31]

Well, I think I'd like to begin by exploring, a little bit, what mindfulness isn't, because I think there's a lot of confusion, especially as mindfulness has become so popular and widespread these days. The teaching of it can be helpful to really dig deeper into what that quality of mind actually is. So often people will say, "well, mindfulness means living in the present." And that definitely is necessary, but it's not sufficient. And the example I sometimes use is black labs - the dogs - really friendly, playful, you know, for me, they are great metta object for me. They just bring out that loving feeling. But when I watch them, they're in the present, you know, responding to all the sensory input. And I have to say - this is probably a bit of a projection, but - they don't look really mindful, to me. They're just following their nose, so to speak. In the present, but not mindful.

Joseph Goldstein [00:15:34] So then mindfulness must mean something in addition to being in the present moment. So then we might say, "well, it's that observing power of mind, you know, where we know what we're knowing." We might call that metacognition. You know, it's that stepping back a little bit and we know we're observing what it is that we're experiencing, but this observing power of mind still isn't mindfulness. And it points to a really important distinction that took me a long time to learn. I was many years into my practice. But when I finally crystallized in my mind, it really helped to clarify things a lot. And that is discerning the difference between mindfulness and recognition, because I think there's a tendency to think that if we recognize what our experience is, we're being mindful: "Oh, fear is present, or love is present, or pain is present." Whatever it is, we recognize it and even recognize it accurately. But that recognition is not mindfulness yet, because we could be observing it, we could be recognizing it through various filters. We could be observing through the filter of wanting. You know, something pleasant. We could be observing or knowing through the filter of aversion, you know, pain arises some difficult emotion and we know it's there, and we recognize it accurately, but we're pushing it away.

So those filters are not part of mindfulness and they're an indication that we're not quite yet in that sweet spot of being in the present, observing what's happening. So we're not just black labs running around. And then the third aspect is observing in a particular way. And this is where the art of meditation and the art of mindfulness comes in. It's learning to observe - and this takes practice - without desire, without greed, without aversion, without delusion, without ignorance. So there's a clarity of understanding that's possible then as we're being mindful of what's arising because we're experiencing things without those filters.

So I think these three steps in coming to mindfulness would be helpful for us to recognize as we're going through the practice.

A pith instruction for recognizing when we're being mindful or not - and this is something that is available for us to do, endlessly, many times a day - and that is really paying attention to the difference in our experience between when we're lost in a thought, and then in that moment of waking up from being lost. My experience, in both my own practice and working with a lot of students, is that generally when people wake up from having been lost in a thought, they'll generally do one of two things: either rush back to some object of meditation like the breath or the body, or judge ourselves for having been lost, and so, "I'm lost again, I can't do this. This is too hard." Whatever mental trip we go on.

Well, there's another alternative that for me has been so illuminating. And that is in all those many moments when we can be aware we're lost, lost, lost in some train of thought. And then in a moment, we wake up and we realize that we've been thinking, instead of rushing to some

other object or getting lost in judgment, right in that moment of transition from being lost to being awake... it's very helpful to pay attention to the difference between those two mindsets and right in that moment because we've gone from one to the other, the difference is so vivid. You know, we really can have the expense of this is what it's like being lost, this is what wakefulness is, this is what mindfulness is, because we're experiencing it in that moment.

And this can reset the whole emotional quality of our practice. So instead of berating ourselves, getting lost over and over again, as we all do, we could take delight in all those moments of waking up from being lost instead of judging ourselves.

We can just appreciate it. "Oh, I've been lost, wait, this is wakefulness. This is awareness."

So we have all those moments of delight that's possible to bring into our practice, we take joy in those moments of wakefulness. Well, we have to pay attention to them.

Tami Simon [00:20:58]

Beautiful. Thank you. And then, Rick, moving on to growing. I think many people, when they think of practice, they have some connection to warmheartedness, or compassion, some connection to the idea of practicing. Waking up from thinking, and connecting to what Joseph was describing - awareness, open awareness. Growing. How does growing fit in something we practice?

Rick Hanson [00:21:28]

I want to say first, that I'm struck endlessly by the fact that this is a question and it's a very legitimate question and it's a near universal question.

And yet it's really striking that this question is so prominent among people who have been learning their whole lives - learning to walk instead of to crawl, learning, later on to be more patient in raising their family, or developing trauma memories that are embedded in their own bodies. So we're surrounded with examples of growing and developing. And we've already heard a couple of examples - just from Joseph and Tara here - about things that one can develop over time. One can develop more of a habit of, let's say, tuning into the body in one's experiences. And also one can develop more of the capacity to be mindful of things with less and less shading or coloring by greed, hatred, and delusion. All of these are forms of developing. And when we develop, it's embodied in two kinds of ways. First, we mainly are tuning into body sensations, emotions, and nonverbal processes. There's a place for learning wise view, developing useful perspectives on things. For example, somewhere in my 20s, I realized that growing up I had been a nerd, but not a wimp. President of the Dork Club, absolutely. But I was

not a wimp. And realizing that, conceptually, it was really, really useful to me. But most of our learning is embodied and it's very physical in the sense of our experience. It's also embodied objectively because if a person acquires any greater trait - mindfulness or trait self-compassion or trait kindness to others, or if they develop any greater sense of self-worth or emotional regulation or commitment to social justice or learning how to operate chopsticks... any kind of growing must involve a physical change in the body.

We can be experientially mindful of the body while simultaneously, objectively, we're a body full of mind. And I'm using the word mind here in the broadest possible sense, including, really, as heart mind altogether - Chitta in Sanskrit. And so the question then becomes, "how do we help ourselves with this inherent process of developing?" And that takes us into the science of positive neuroplasticity. I'll talk about this at some length in my bit, I'll be really summary here. What scientists are increasingly revealing is that as people acquire greater trait mindfulness or trait compassion or trait resilience, their brain is literally changing along the way. The brain is continually changing, embedded in a body that is embedded in the world. But the most local basis of who we are becoming resides between our ears. Just because it's in the head doesn't mean that this development process, this process of cultivation - bhavana - is Spock like or heady.

It just means that physically well, you know, the primary most local basis for any kind of development over time is the brain. So that process happens in two simple steps that we can influence from the inside out, which gives us tremendous power in a changing world and a challenging world. The first step is we have to experience whatever we want to grow. That's the fundamental basis of any kind of neuroplastic change. We must experience mindfulness, or self-worth, or a greater sense of skillfulness in dealing with somebody at work. Let's say we must experience what we want to grow and then - critically important - the second necessary stage as Joseph said earlier: something can be necessary, but not yet sufficient.

You know, experiencing is necessary. But it's not sufficient for learning. There must also be some kind of lasting change in the brain in neural structure or function. It's a two-stage process. And in my experience. Well, whether they are formally trained as therapists or coaches or human resources teachers or frankly, mindfulness teachers often leave out, as I have myself again and again and again, that second necessary stage of any lasting change for the better. And it's humbling and vulnerable in the body to really appreciate how many of our useful experiences just wash through the brain like water through a sieve while our "negative" experiences of hurt, or anger, or greed, or hatred sink in deep.

You know, I've said the brain is like Velcro for bad experiences, but Teflon for positive ones. So what we can do - and I'll talk more about this in my section at some length - is turn on the

inner recorder and really support that second necessary stage of learning in which the passing experiences we're having can actually leave lasting residues behind that are beneficial, woven, as Tara said in the beginning in a different sense, woven into the fabric of our own living body. The essence is really simple. For me, it kind of boils down to doing at least one of three things: stay with the experience for a breath or longer, keep feeling. Second, really feel it in your body. The more we feel things in our body, the more we wake down, not just wake up, the more we're going to grow from our experiences.

And third, this is a little bit of a neural hack. Focus on what's enjoyable about the experience. What's meaningful about it or pleasurable about it, which will turbocharge different neurotransmitter processes in your brain that will really, really help it sink in. I mean, for me, the bottom line takeaway is that we have a tremendous power actually to help ourselves every day, learn a little bit, grow a little bit, heal a little bit, and become a little wiser, or more loving, or calmer, or stronger when we go to bed than when we woke up in the morning.

And that power to me is extremely timely at a period in history when so many people feel just pushed around, understandably, by very powerful external forces or their internal reactions to them. So reclaiming this agency inside our own selves is really important. No one can defeat us fundamentally in the innermost temple of our own being. No one can defeat us there, which is incredibly helpful. And no one can do the work there except us, which brings it home to responsibility, which for me gives it an authenticity and an honorableness that is really useful.