

LOVING, KNOWING, AND GROWING

A Conversation: Part 3

Tami Simon [00:00:10]

You know, it's interesting, Joseph, that you talked about words that bring us together instead of creating division, because one of the questions that I wanted to ask all three of you has to do with how practicing in the way that you're teaching in this series, how that will impact our collective life. And we could even go so far as to say, the state of the world, which so many people are so concerned about.

And I know so many of the people listening right now are concerned about that whether that has to do with climate change or other issues that are affecting our entire population. I can imagine someone thinking, "well, this is a little thing on the side. It's a little esoteric or maybe it's even a little soft. This is a little soft for our times." So I wonder if you can each make that very explicit for people how the practices of loving, knowing, and growing relate to the challenges we face collectively.

Rick Hanson [00:01:13]

This is a classic question I say, as someone who grew up in the 60s and 70s: personal or political? And first of all, I think that's a false dichotomy. I think as we develop ourselves personally, we're more able to sustain political action. And as we help the world, we create conditions that promote and support our own personal well-being. So the two come together and I think there's a natural rhythm in people's lives in which maybe they step into the battlefield, as it were, for a while, and then they step back to renew and repair and refresh themselves and gain more or wisdom. Then they step back into it again.

And I think there are many models of people in all the traditions of the world, including in a very secular frame of people who clearly have a personal practice that they draw upon, who are also extremely effective in the political policy sphere. So, first point.

Second, I find that a lot of the forces of harm in the world are about the interests of the few at the cost to the many. And one of the ways that that's accomplished, including in ostensibly democratic societies, is to foster a sense of dispiritedness and confusion and overwhelming despair in the population.

And one of the most important things we can do politically is to stand up against that process and to claim our right to recognize what's true. Joseph was talking kind of at the very beginning - and to underscore the point - that some might say the truth is what sets us free. Others might say it's ignorance and delusion that is the root of all suffering. So, you know, working our way, sometimes even fighting our way to some clarity for ourselves and then to share that with others is really, really important.

And also cultivating the sense of agency, if only inside our own minds. Sometimes we can't really do anything about external conditions. You know, the fix is in. We're overwhelmed. We're outnumbered. You know, the jury is rigged, what have you. But inside our own minds at least, we can preserve a fundamental autonomy and freedom in how we will practice with our reactions to these conditions and how we'll work with them.

So to me, I think of practice as a profound form of, in a sense, civil disobedience or cultural disobedience, where we hold on to a kind of scruffy capacity to choose for ourselves how we will orient to these conditions. And if one person practices, it gives heart to so many other people they see that this one person is not cowed or bowed. They may not be safe to speak up in the moment, but in their own core, they know what they see and they know what they're going to do about it.

Tara Brach [00:04:09]

I'm glad to carry forward and thank you for that. I like the energy of that if I think about it.

So what is really the cause of the suffering in our world? There is this perception of a separate self and that out of that, the greed and the violence. Violence not just to each other, but to our earth. And I feel like the whole trajectory of this practice is one of waking up from that story of a separateness and sensing a "we," sensing that we act on behalf of the collective because we belong to the collective.

And I was so struck a couple of years ago, the Dalai Lama said that if every 8 year old learns meditation, there'll be no more war in the next generation. And there's something really powerful, I get really enthusiastic about anything where we're bringing mindfulness and compassion, empathy to schools, because that to me is where hope is.

There's an evolutionary psychologist, Cozolino, who says that in terms of our trajectory, it's not the survival of the fittest. It's the survival of the nurtured. And when I think of nurturing, it's both wings. We have to be able to see clearly the past, the stories of selfness and feel that tenderness when

we wake up in these ways through these practices, we actually can respond to what's going on, to all that conditioning that's going on.

And one of the things that is most specific, when Tami, you bring this up, like is this soft? Well, there's all this research now that's developing about how mindfulness and compassion can help to undo unseen bias. One of the deepest conditionings we have is to feel better than, superior, or worse than. We keep on making a hierarchy over and over again that leads to pressing and hurting other beings, including non-human animals. It's horrific. So if we really can wake up from that hierarchy and sense what we've been trapped in, and then there's this natural response that we want to take care of each other and we want to take care of our earth. So I feel like there is no possibility of transformation without transforming consciousness. And that's really what these three legs of the stool are about.

Joseph Goldstein [00:06:43]

Something that's been really helpful for me with regard to this question is just highlighting the understanding that much of the suffering that exists in the world really is an expression of different mindstates of greed and hatred and delusion. It's those mindstates that are the cause of the suffering. It's not the person, of course. Different people embody a different mindset. It's one way of reducing the reaction maybe of anger, or frustration, or some states that are not helpful in addressing the situation. is to move the focus of attention from the person to the actual cause in the mind that is conditioning those actions.

So just as an experiment. You know, we might see somebody do something harmful and just feel very angry at them for doing it. But if we understood that it was fear that was motivating that action or greed that was motivating that action, the response to that is not so much anger at the fear or anger even at the greed. But understand that these are the states of mind that are resulting in harmful actions. How can I work, how can I help to alleviate those mind states? So then the approach or our response takes on a much more balanced and effective possibility.

So just as one example of this, I was teaching a retreat just after 9/11, just outside of New York. And as part of the retreat, we were doing the Metta - the lovingkindness - meditation. And when we got to trying to sending lovingkindness to all beings, a lot of the people were from New York. There was no way that they were going to wish for these people who flew the planes into the World Trade Center, "May you be happy" - that that was not even in the realm of possibility for many of the people on retreat. So it made me really stop to reflect. If lovingkindness really is a universal quality that is boundless and can be extended to all beings without exception, what does that mean and what would that look like in this situation? What does Metta mean in terms of directing it towards people who are doing hugely harmful things? So it was an interesting

moment for me, you know, to explore this. And upon reflection, I realized there is absolutely a way of including all beings in the field of lovingkindness. But it takes finding the right expression for it. So, for example, in that situation, it was not, "may you be happy." You know, "may you enjoy your life." No, that didn't make sense in that situation.

However, the wish "may you be free of hatred. May you be free of fear." Is there anyone we would exclude from that wish? I don't think so, because we realize that these are the qualities in the mind that are causing the suffering, that are causing the harmful action. So our loving wish for everybody would be "may you be free of those states which cause harm." So I think there is a way of bringing our understanding from the practice to these situations in the world that actually make us more effective.

Tami Simon [00:10:42]

All right, guys, I have one final question. Which is I think that many people who have been listening to this conversation will feel motivated and turned on right now to go deeper, to listen and engage with the individual teaching and practice sessions that all three of you are offering. But I can also imagine someone listening who's in a hard place right now and who doesn't feel a lot of motivation. Perhaps they're feeling unloving towards themselves or they're feeling stuck in a type of depression or something like that. They feel stuck. And they don't really feel they have the energy. It sounds like a lot of work, this word "practice." And to go further and to do these things, what would you say to that person that my comfort and encourage them?

Tara Brach [00:11:46]

I'm wondering whether I could do it in the form perhaps of reflection, if that would be all right. That if anyone, as you're listening or sensing where you're stuck in your life and you're wondering, "well, can this really untangle the tangle?" - that you just take a moment to let yourself bring to mind, let's say, a situation where the tangle feels really sticky and difficult.

Just bring it to mind, sense the worst part of it. And in these moments, let yourself recognize what feels worst about it. What's really bothering you or agitating you? And just let yourself feel it as it is in your body and breathe with it for a moment. Just recognizing and allowing this is here. And there's a powerful way you can be in relationship with it, which is in some way you're saying, "yes, that this is how it is right now," - it's an honest acknowledgment of, "oh, it's like this right now." I sometimes will say this belongs just the way waves belong in the ocean.

So just breathe and feel what's going on in your body and your heart. Sense the background stories and on some level say, "yes, this belongs right now. These are the waves in the ocean right here." And as you do, sense what kind of a gesture of kindness might most be comforting

just in this moment. I often will put my hand on my heart and in some way say, "it's OK," you know? Just sensing that your own awake heart is keeping company in a kind way with the waves of experience. And notice what happens. Notice what shifts when there's some gesture of kindness. Thank you.

Joseph Goldstein [00:13:55]

That was beautiful, Tara. And so maybe just building on that, or another expression of that, sort of a little pith instruction or an understanding, but - something that has really been helpful to me is, in situations where I feel like I'm struggling, whatever the situation is, but there's that sense of struggle. I've come to understand that that feeling of struggling means just one thing. It means that there's something going on in our lives, and our body and mind, and the world around us. Something that's going on that we're not accepting, because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling to adjust. It's very simple feedback.

So instead of seeing the struggle as a problem, it actually is a feedback to us saying, "OK, well, what's happening that I'm not accepting?" And it might be a difficult emotion. There might be a pain in the body. It may be a restless mind.

You know, like in meditation, it is a sitting where we're just thinking the whole hour, restless. And then with struggling, we feel like we're struggling in our meditation. The struggle simply is that we're not accepting what is actually there. So taking the sense of struggle to be feedback and then the interest in exploring, "OK. What is it that I'm not accepting?" You know, we could do kind of a checklist, "OK. Is this something in the body? Is it something in my heart? Is something in the mind?" And as soon as we can feel, "Oh, it's this." Seeing if it's possible - it may take a little time - to relax.

It's just as Tara was saying, can we just settle into that experience? Just one thing to add there. The acceptance is not necessarily the end of the story in some way, it's the beginning of the story. Once we come to that place of acceptance of seeing, "oh, this is what I've been trying to push away." And then we open to it. Then from that place of acceptance, there's enough balance and clarity to say, "OK. Is there an appropriate action? Is there an appropriate response to this situation?" And it might be shifting position. It might be changing our focus. Maybe we want to just make the mind very spacious and listen to sounds. Maybe it means speaking to somebody, if it's a difficult interpersonal relationship. But the response I think will be much more appropriate and effective when it's built on that place of acceptance and clarity of what's going on within ourselves.

So that's why just this whole understanding of practice, meaning greater awareness and greater love and greater understanding just seems so fundamental to navigating the world and our lives where there are so many difficulties and challenges. I think this is broader understanding of practice really addresses that very question.

Rick Hanson [00:17:28]

I would say, to build on what Tara and Joseph said as we practice, maybe with a hand on the heart, the feeling of that, or what does it feel like to accept something? We can then help that really sink in. We can stay with it, can get a feeling of kind of vulnerable openness to it. So it really lands inside rather than jumping on to the next channel, you know, or chasing the next shiny object. Or enacting when I see really extremely, often, an unwillingness or a fear related to actually giving to ourselves what our heart longs for. And helping those seeds to really root and grow inside us rather than pushing those away, maybe as an internalization of how others have pushed us away or pushed parts of us away. We can embrace them and receive them and to ourselves. It's a very intimate process of receptivity and it usually just takes an extra few seconds, sometimes longer.

We might deliberately do a practice of cultivation to really marinate in, let's say, that warmth and tenderness and support for ourselves, for the feeling of saying to ourselves, "I see you, I accept you. I include this. It's okay, honey. It's okay, sweetie." Or if we just internalize something that might feel more muscular, like, "next time around, I want to have a little bit more of a habit I've developed of feeling a little stronger or being a little firmer initially rather than just kind of getting pushed around by that other person or that situation." And that's a way in which we can help ourselves grow so that the next time it comes around, we're a little less mindless. We're a little less unkind to ourselves and we're a little more skillful with the outer world, and the inner one, too.

Tami Simon [00:19:39]

With this opening series, it's been a great joy to be with Tara Brach, Joseph Goldstein, and Rick Hanson. We have the chance, all of us, to deepen our loving, knowing, and growing. And again, picking up on what Tara said about expressing our warm-heartedness - I want to thank all of you for joining us and being with us, and for the good work you're doing with yourself and with others.

Thanks, everyone, and thank you, three wonderful, generous teachers. Thank you so much. SoundsTrue.com, Waking up the World. Thanks.