

## Suffering

### How Is It That Suffering Happens and How We One Help

These are the same questions the Buddha pondered, under the Bodi tree. Our pondering is over much more limited versions of these same questions. We're interested only in *unnecessary* suffering, how it happens and what we can do to respond to it. Perhaps, all suffering is unnecessary. We're not tackling that one. We're concerned with only some. Let's look at why.

The kind of suffering we're working with is the kind that developed as adaptations to the ongoing situations one grew up in and, in some cases, some particularly intense experiences. These adaptations are sets of usually nonconscious habits of belief, thinking, perception and action. Such habits function automatically and quickly, without conscious intention or control, and without effort.<sup>1</sup> The habits of answering or speaking quickly, are examples. One's usual posture can be another. Adaptations that run counter to one's true nature, usually entail suffering. Often, further habits are created that keep the suffering outside of consciousness.

*In this perspective individual behaviors that are usually seen as symptomatic of personal ill health can be seen as functional, adaptive, and useful for the individual in the system within which he operates. Although they boomerang on the actor in ways she does not like, they testify to her basic strength and resourcefulness, wiliness even, rather than her weakness.*

— Joanna Macy<sup>2</sup>

Such habits are not easily made conscious. They function outside of consciousness and some of them set the conditions which occasion suffering. However, if they can be made conscious, they're often changeable. They're changeable because they are no longer needed to deal with current situations.

Here's how we can help. First of all, we want to promote the conditions that encourage feelings of safety, hope and caring. To encourage these, we bring ourselves into a loving presence state of being. At the same time, we bring ourselves into harmony and alignment with the other person. There are techniques for doing this, but more important is "who we are and where we're coming from".<sup>3</sup>

Next, we have to clarify for the person we're working with, the goal and purpose of the work we're doing together. What we do is unusual. It's not common for psychotherapists, etc. to do things like probes and taking over. So we have to explain the method to our clients and we have to explain what their part in the process is.

Once these are established, we begin the search for observable indicators of nonconscious habits. Then we create experiments based on the indicators we have observed. These are done with the conscious, willing participation and with the other in a mindful state. Experiments are done to bring normally unconscious implicit beliefs, memories and images into consciousness. If the experiment succeeds, something significant emerges and we work with the whatever that is. Usually this involves painful memories and strong emotions. When the outcome of an experiment is that kind of spontaneous reaction, a healing process is possible. What we do to support it at this point requires skill, patience and compassion. We provide protection, containment, time, understanding, comfort

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<sup>1</sup> Discussed in Wilson, Timothy D. (2004). *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard University Press. pg. 53, and in this handbook, on pg. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Macy, Joanna (1991) *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural Systems*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. Pg. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Take a look at the Scharmer quote on page 3 of the 2008 Training Handbook.

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and attentive silences. Given this support, integration happens naturally and signs of it can easily be observed.

Lastly, when the person comes out of his or her integrative silences and reengages with us, we listen and wait. Finally, we suggest, offer, create and provide new experiences for the client, experiences that establish the real possibility of new habits and less suffering, the real possibility of developing a way of being that fosters conditions favorable to wholeness, health, peace, pleasure and success.