

The View of Unconditional Healing - Living in the Unknowable Now

I've often mentioned that we spend the majority of our time living in our head, so much so that that's become the societal norm of operating in the world. We live in a very conceptual, heady culture where people often act with a lot of deliberation, stuck in habitual patterns meant to protect us, and a lack of sensitivity and feeling. Feeling desensitized is one deficiency with over-reliance on our thoughts, but I will discuss other negatives associated with that behavior.

I would also like to discuss why we do that. Why do we live that way when we already know intuitively that it's not the optimal way to live in the world - that it causes a sense of dissatisfaction? I think the reason is pretty straightforward; that the world is very alive, very uncertain and without bias, (not for or against us), and that frightens us immensely. By living in our head we disassociate ourselves from that aliveness, from that uncertainty and we call that "knowing". Knowing in the sense of reaching a place of certainty rather than having to confront uncertainty.

It's called "knowing" because we think we know what is going on, but we're doing it from the vantage point of an observer, rather than someone fully engaged with life. We're living our life in our head, in our thoughts, from a distance and it's so much the norm that you may not feel like you're doing anything out of the ordinary. Living with so-called certainty, that we know what is going on, but not realizing that it is simply a filtered version of reality. It also could be called aversion. It's both. It's a "version" and it's "aversion". We're averting our senses from the way things are.

It's also very deadening. It's a deadening way to live because it makes the world static and freezes it as a certain version of what we think is going on. We have very set opinions about certain things like our friends and loved ones. We freeze them in a certain way, and we'll use language like "oh you always do that", or "you never do that", and of course the truth is somewhere in between. They sometimes do that and sometimes do this.

But we also have this "knowing" attitude toward ourselves. We freeze ourselves as an agreeable version of ourselves, which lacks spontaneity and keeps us in our comfort zone as a protection. We put ourselves in a box, so to speak and the size of that box is totally dependent on how much fear we have. If there's a lot of fear the box becomes smaller and smaller. If there's only a little bit of fear the box can be bigger, but it's still a box. So then we're leading our life within the framework of how we think we should be, according to a comforting self-image we've latched onto. Who we think we are rather than who we actually are at any given moment. This has far reaching consequences, much more than we suspect.

In my meditation instruction and teaching, I often talk about fully inhabiting the body. Embodiment practice, if you will, is a way of countering the very habitual tendency to live in our thoughts. We don't actually inhabit the body. We're detached from our feelings, so that we actually live in a psychosomatic body. What I mean by that is...we don't feel things directly, it's filtered by and through our thought process.

When we're in pain we don't feel the pain directly. It gets filtered through our judging process, through our memories and biases, and that pain can feel heightened because of that. In other words our suffering can be increased by virtue of our thought process, and it happens with such speed that we may not notice it is happening.

Of course it's not like we set out to do this or we plan this. It happens in a flash when fear arises. When things don't go our way, such as an illness, or loss of a relationship, this tends to amplify this whole process of retreating into our thoughts. That's why I'm talking about this filtering process in the middle of a healing circle where we're all coming here for support. We're all experiencing some sort of illness or adversity like loss of a job, or loss of a loved one. We've all come together for that.

So why am I choosing to talk about this process, rather than just about feeling better? Because the heart of the matter is when we're going through a major crisis or adversity, the process I described is heightened immensely and it's much easier to notice it's happening, that we're retreating into our head. In other words, at those times in your life when you're feeling your worst, when you're feeling like your world is crashing around you, you are much more open to noticing things, and taking a different approach.

Your thought process is no longer protecting you, there's no longer a sense of being in control, so perhaps you're more open to taking a more contemplative approach in your life. You find yourself asking deep questions you've never asked before like "why me?", or "why is this happening?", or "did the way in which I live cause this situation?"

Due to the uncertainty that's roiling us, we do tend to place blame. We either blame something out there, like the number of donuts we ate, or we blame something in here, like ourself and our "obvious" shortcomings. Either way, external or internal, the blame game becomes a way of avoiding how we feel. Rather than actually feeling the pain of the situation, we place blame, which is a way of disassociating from our heart. If there's someone to blame then I don't really have to feel what I'm feeling. I can concentrate on something else that has a storyline to it.

The ironic part is that even when we're very clear about what's going on, things are still uncertain. Like if you get sick and go to the doctor, your doctor may or may not be able to help you. You certainly hope so but even if you're cured of that particular disease, if it's an illness we're talking about, it may come back. There's no guarantee. For example, people with cancer often live in a state of remission rather than cure. No doctor ever says you're completely cured. You're in remission and then at the end of five years they pronounce you "cured", but it's rather arbitrary.

So, is there another way to live in the world? Is there another way to operate and behave? I think we all know intuitively that there probably is, but it takes focused effort and a sense of urgency, and fortunately those items are in abundance when we're going through a difficult time.

It's very easy to skate through your life when things are going "well" according to whatever your benchmark is. Let's say you wanted to get that great job and you got that great job. Things are going well and you tend to skate along, go with the flow.

But then you lose that great job or become ill, and that brings a sense of shock. A sense of questioning arises, and a sense of focus and urgency also arises, a desire to immediately restore the status quo. You could say everything comes alive, although it might not be pleasurable at all.

Certainly, we're worried about practical things, like putting food on the table. We're concerned about how to pay the rent, but in addition to that very logistical, practical stuff, we might start to naturally question existential issues. What is the point of this? Why am I doing what I'm doing? Was I happy before this happened? How am I living my life - is this the life I want to be living? I'm going to die - what am I doing with my life in the interim? Suddenly, mortality rears its head, and we naturally start to look for a deeper meaning to our existence, maybe for the very first time.

If we really ask questions with our whole heart and mind, we become one with the questions we're asking. Becoming one with the questions so much so, that we realize the answer is contained within the question. When we ask questions in this way, it naturally opens up our mind because we are saying "I don't know", and that's very different from our usual "I know".

Our constant drumbeat of I know, I know, I know, puts us to sleep because if we know, there's no curiosity, there's no reason to question. Whereas when we question, when we let uncertainty arise, that uncertainty, albeit uncomfortable, is a move toward a different mindset, a different place.

The whole game of distraction that we normally play is a way of avoiding our own uncertainty about ourself and our life. It is a disassociation from the uncertainty into a seemingly more solid realm of our own making. But when you ask these fundamental questions, it cuts through the certainty like a hot knife through butter and you're just left awake and open. You're asking a question with your whole body and your whole mind.

Now, that place I'm talking about, that open place that is vibrating with the fundamental questions we're asking, that place may sound great. It may sound like we all want to live there, but that place is not necessarily pleasant. It can feel like you're sitting on a razor's edge because it is alive and fluid, and you can't make a comfortable nest there. It is awake and unsettled, but that's the place where unconditional health can be found.

That's the only place where it can be found, in that place of unknowing. It's not really a place or time so let's call it the "unknowing now", because you are fully present at that moment in time. You're not distracted. There's a sense of focus. There's a sense of urgency. There's a sense of presence. There's a sense of opening and there's a sense of no longer observing the world, but being entirely immersed in it. In other words, we're no longer observing our experience from a distance, but we're joined with it.

This bears repeating. At that moment of questioning, of waking up, of being fully present, we are no longer disassociating from the world or our experience any more. We're completely joined with it, like two hands joined in prayer. In that moment of presence, that's where unconditional health can be found. It's 100% the present moment and we're fully living in it with all of the uncertainty, all of the aliveness, pain, and joy.

So when we talk about the view of unconditional healing that's really what we're talking about. We're talking about fully being present and that brings a sense of well-being, but it's an unconditional well-being. It's not based on landing a good job. It's not based on things going right. It's not based on being free of disease. It's based on fully being present so that there's no separation between ourself and our experience, whatever that experience might be.

Now, you may think to yourself this sounds a bit abstract and possibly unattainable, but the way it's attained is through glimpses. So meditation practice, specifically embodiment practice, is a way to encourage that. Let's say we sit for 20 minutes, focusing on fully inhabiting the body (listen to the audio on embodiment practice), and maybe you have a glimpse of being fully present for 10 seconds. It's there, you're fully present and then you start thinking, gee, how do I maintain this, and poof, it's gone. However, if you do this on a frequent basis that 10 seconds of a sense of unconditional well-being, of presence, maybe lasts for 15 seconds and then 20 seconds, and that experience is so different, so compelling, that it becomes a building block. It makes an indelible impression in your mind.

It becomes a building block, no matter your circumstances. You can relax and tune into the present moment and feel your pain fully and directly, without the filter of concept, of thinking. It doesn't mean thinking goes away, it doesn't mean fear goes away; it just means those things become part of the mosaic of your experience, like clouds in the sky. The thing is, when we do that, when we're able to do that, we notice that the pain isn't constant. It pulses, it ebbs and flows. The sense that it's constant comes from thinking about it endlessly and having an opinion about it.

"This will never stop" is one opinion. "I deserve this pain" is another thought, another theme. That adds to the pain, certainly to its duration, but if we're willing to face the pain directly without a filter, without a judgment about it, the experience of pain changes, and we suffer less.

I want to end this article with a quote. It is from Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher who lived a long time ago.

*Not knowing is true knowledge.
Presuming to know is a disease.
First realize that you are sick,
Then you can move towards health.*

So, what he's talking about there is obviously not ordinary sickness, but the sickness of "knowing", he's literally calling out "knowing" as a disease. That's our fundamental disease and then getting cancer and diabetes and losing your job, those are all ancillary experiences. The fundamental problem is "knowing", "certainty", which is a mindset that is stuck into a habitual way of thinking and a habitual attitude. That mindset closes us off from feeling what we feel, and from being present. Knowing and the certainty of thinking we know what's going on is a way of disassociating from what's actually going on.

However the good news is those situations of illness and adversity directly challenge our "knowing", challenge our defense mechanisms, and can serve as the gateway into unconditional health.