

(adapted from Tara's upcoming book, *True Refuge* (Bantam, 2012))

About twelve years ago, a number of Buddhist teachers began to share a new mindfulness tool based on the acronym RAIN. This training in presence is an 'in the trenches' support for working with intense and difficult states of mind. I have now taught it to thousands of students, clients, and mental health professionals, adapting and expanding it into the version you'll find below. I've also made it a core practice in my own life. When we are caught up and suffering in the trance of fear and separation RAIN can help bring us home to a full mindfulness by directing our attention in a clear, systematic way.

Here are the four key steps:

R *Recognize* what is happening

A *Allow* life to be just as it is

I *Investigate* inner experience with an *Intimate* attention

N *Non-Identification*; rest in *Natural awareness*.

Recognize what is happening.

Recognition starts when you focus your attention on whatever thoughts, emotions, feelings or sensations are arising in the present moment. Recognition is seeing what is true in your inner life. You can awaken recognition simply by asking yourself: "What is happening

inside me right now?” Call on your natural curiosity as you focus inward. Try to let go of any preconceived ideas about what is happening and instead, listen in a kind, receptive way to your body and heart.

Allow life to be just as it is.

Allowing means “letting be” the thoughts, emotions, feelings or sensations you discover. It can be helpful when difficult experiences arise, to ask yourself, “Can I be with this?” or “Can I let this be, just as it is?” You may feel a natural sense of aversion, of wishing that unpleasant feelings would go away and perhaps feeling shame that they are even arising, but as you become more willing to be present with “what is,” a different quality of attention will emerge.

The realization that allowing is intrinsic to healing can give rise to a conscious intention to “let be.” Many clients and students I work with support their resolve to accept what is happening by mentally whispering an encouraging word or phrase. For instance, you might feel the grip of fear and whisper “let be,” or experience the swelling of deep grief and whisper “yes.” You might use the words, “this too,” or “I consent.” At first you might feel a sense of tentatively “putting up” with unpleasant emotions or sensations. Or you might say “yes” to fear and hope that saying “yes,” will make fear magically disappear. In reality, we have to consent again and again, sometimes recognizing even the most subtle ways we are tensing against fear or pain. Yet even the first gesture of allowing, simply

whispering a phrase like “yes,” or “I consent,” begins to create a space that softens the harsh edges of your pain. Your entire being is not so rallied in resistance. Offer the phrase gently and patiently, and in time your receptivity will deepen. Your defenses relax and you may feel a physical sense of yielding or opening to waves of experience.

Sometimes, however, just the notion of allowing brings up vehement resistance. “What do you mean!” someone might say. “Am I supposed to accept that he betrayed me? “Am I supposed to say ‘yes’ to feeling self-loathing?” “To this awful anxiety?” In these situations it is important to point out that we are agreeing only the experience—in our body, heart, mind—in *the present moment*. We’re not being asked to accept the situation itself or another person’s behavior, just the felt experience, here and now. In fact, when resistance arises, or first step is to accept the experience of resisting. We are recognizing and allowing the disgust, the tension in the body, the blaming thoughts, the aversion. As I often teach it, “You are saying ‘yes’ to your ‘no!’”¹

Investigate with an Intimate attention.

At times, simply working through the first two steps of RAIN—the basic facets of mindfulness—is enough to provide relief and reconnect you with presence. In other cases,

¹ It is also important to note that for someone who has experienced trauma, RAIN may initially be contraindicated and potentially re-traumatizing. We need to feel a degree of safety and trust to say “yes” and open to raw feelings. When there is very intense fear or terror lurking, it may be wise to honor the “no” of our protective defenses, and first cultivate the inner and outer resources of safety and compassion that provide a groundwork for practicing RAIN.

however, the simple intention to recognize and allow is not enough. For instance, if you are in the thick of a divorce, about to lose a job or dealing with the distress of a loved one, you may be easily overwhelmed by intense feelings. Because these feelings are triggered over and over—you get a phone call from your soon-to-be ex, your bank statement comes, you wake up to pain in the morning—your reactions can become very entrenched. In such situations, you may need to further awaken and strengthen mindful awareness with the I of RAIN.

Investigation means calling on your natural interest—the desire to know truth—and directing a more focused attention to your present experience. Simply pausing to ask, “What is happening inside me?” might initiate recognition, but with investigation you engage in a more active and pointed kind of inquiry. You might ask yourself: “How am I experiencing this in my body?” or “What am I believing?” or “What does this feeling want from me?”

The investigation phase of RAIN can uncover experience that has been outside of your conscious awareness. We often don’t ask ourselves the very questions that might most unhook us from an unconscious identification with our thoughts and feelings. For instance, if you are possessed by feelings of fear and hurt, asking yourself “What am I believing right now?” may uncover the stories of personal failure or mistrust that have been fueling the feelings. Consciously naming the belief can weaken its grip. On the other hand, if you

are lost in obsessive thinking, you might not remember to ask “What am I feeling in my body?” This question can help you to step out of intellectualization, judgments and mental commentary, and to directly contact the felt sense of vulnerability or woundedness.

Exploring the felt sense in the body is a key element of mindfulness and insight. As you investigate, you might contact sensations of hollowness or shakiness, and then tap into a story you’ve told yourself for years about always being pushed away by those you most want to be close to. This might lead to a memory of rejection, and then to feelings of shame, hurt or loneliness. Buried in this you might feel a yearning for acceptance, for connection. Unless these parts of your psyche are consciously contacted, they will control your experience and perpetuate the identification with a threatened, deficient self.

However, such inquiry alone is not enough to arouse a full mindful presence. In order for investigation to be healing and freeing, we need to approach our experience with an *intimate* quality of attention. This means contacting a sense of care and warmth and offering a kind welcome to whatever comes up. Without this heart energy, investigation cannot penetrate; there is not enough safety and openness for real contact: Self-compassion is an inherent ingredient in a mindful presence.

Imagine that your child has been bullied at school and comes home in tears. What is needed is both understanding (investigation) and compassion (intimacy). In order to find

out what happened and how your child is feeling, you have to offer a kind, receptive, gentle attention. In RAIN, this intimate attention is offered to our inner life. It softens the armoring of the heart and makes inquiry, and ultimately insight and healing, possible.

For many people, self-compassion is rare or non-existent. Training in mindfulness gradually cultivates our capacity to hold difficult inner experience with kindness. The seeds of this shift in relating to ones inner life are planted in the initial phase of RAIN—recognizing a painful emotional state and allowing it to be as it is. Research done with brain imaging has shown that mindful attention itself activates parts of the brain associated with compassion and empathy. The I of RAIN—investigating and intentionally offering an intimate attention—both strengthens and deepens mindfulness, giving rise to a full and authentically compassionate presence. In this way, compassion can be understood to be an intrinsic component of mindful presence, and also a precious fruit.

Realize Non-identification; Rest in Natural Awareness.

The lucid, open and kind presence evoked in the R, A and I of RAIN leads to the N: the freedom of *Non-identification*, and the realization of what I call *Natural awareness* or natural presence. Non-identification means that your self-sense is not fused with, or defined by, any limited set of emotions, sensations or stories about who you are.

Identification keeps us locked into what I call the “small self,” the self of trance. When identification with the small self is loosened, we begin to intuit and live from the aliveness,

openness and love that express our natural awareness. In a very immediate way, we find we have more choices about how to respond to life—new possibilities open up, fresh ways of relating with ourselves, with loved ones and colleagues—and we are filled with more gratitude, greater ease.

The first three steps of RAIN require intentional activity. In contrast, the N of RAIN expresses the result of mindfulness: a liberating realization of natural awareness. While for some people, this kind of awakening might uproot the suffering of trance once and for all, for most of us, freedom from emotional suffering unfolds more gradually. You might find yourself moving through many rounds of getting lost in the old stories of what is wrong with you, wrong with others, wrong with your life --and then remembering to arrive once again in mindful presence. Yet with each round, the understanding that you are not the isolated, deficient, endangered self depicted in your stories deepens; and with each round the realization of your true potential—awakened, loving presence—blossoms more fully.