

## **5. Nurturing the Positive**

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018

The eagle is a symbol of freedom and transcendence all over the world. An eagle is featured on the national flags of 11 nations, and too many coats of arms to count. From the Roman Empire to the earliest inhabitants of the Americas, this ubiquitous symbol is universally recognized as a symbol of strength and freedom. Why? Because she flies effortlessly between the earthly world of mundane troubles and the heavenly realms of spirit and power. She can travel on the wind wherever she wants to go. She is fearless and strong and her endurance seems infinite. In our practice, we are like eagles. We, too, can soar above our day-to-day troubles, finding freedom in the spaciousness of a clearer and broader view of the experience of being.

The eagle can soar because she has two wings, and she knows how to use them. The techniques we've been learning recently is one of our wings: one half of the story. Noting, SEE-HEAR-FEEL, allowing and accepting, learning to see things as they really are, observing this moment in such detail that we discover the emptiness of it, we dissolve into nothing. This is an inward-looking observation technique by which we discover the freedom that comes from realizing that there is nothing inside here, in reality. Just a series of activities, but no *thing* that could be called self. This half of the practice, this wing, is the wing of un-becoming, of experiencing emptiness.

The other wing is about creating connection. It's about recognizing that at the same time, we live in a world with billions of other beings. We interact with and impact others. We cannot exist in isolation (or not-exist in isolation!). We must learn to see others as they are, to connect, to understand the fundamental sameness of all beings. This side is about improving ourselves and the world. It is about actively creating non-suffering within ourselves and others, eventually embracing the unifying reality that we are all one, there is no difference between self and other. We merge with each other and lose the separateness of individual self. We become everything.

Nothing on the one hand, and everything on the other. In the middle the eagle's heart beats: *toda y nada*.

The active creation of positivity in the world is a universal urge, not limited to religion or spirituality. Of course we see it in established religion: prayers of intercession intended to reduce suffering, admonitions to care for the sick and to feed and clothe the poor, practices such as loving

kindness, holidays and ceremonies like Yom Kippur and Lent that are aimed at personal assessment and intentions to improve our lives. In the secular world, we perform “random acts of kindness,” volunteer our time, and give our money, to help others. Then there is the understanding that we must help ourselves. The truth behind so many self-help books and programs is that we cannot love others if we do not love ourselves. Psychological therapies such as CBT and cognitive reframing are aimed at reducing our own suffering so that we can interact with others in a healthy way. This idea of improving the world through self-improvement is ubiquitous.

Unified Mindfulness offers a framework for Nurturing Positive meditation techniques that encompasses all these things and more, using the spaces and techniques we have already learned, and all the while continuing to train and apply Concentration, Clarity, and Equanimity. The natural consequence of Nurturing Positive meditation will be active positive behavior in the world, but that’s another lesson. Tonight we are going to learn how to nurture positivity in our meditation specifically.

We’re going to use the same focus spaces that we’ve already learned: See, Hear, and Feel. We’ll be working primarily in the internal, or subjective, spaces: See In, Hear In, and Feel In. However, because we are going to create content in our experience, rather than observing what is already there, we won’t be Noting. Let’s start with a generic technique intended simply to create pleasant subjective feelings. Once you get the idea of how that works, we’ll look at adapting the technique to specific situations, and will play around with the many different forms this technique can take.

[GUIDED MEDITATION OF SEE, HEAR, and FEEL GOOD.]

So that was a totally non-religious application of the technique, but you can see that if you were to choose a religious icon or symbol as your image, and an associated phrase or sound, then this would become a tool for adoration or contemplation of divinity. For example, if you were to picture the Virgin Mary while reciting the Hail Mary in your mind, then the emotional sensations that would arise would be love or comfort or gratitude toward the Virgin. If you were a buddhist of certain schools, you might imagine yourself as being, say Kwan Yin, and would chant to yourself the translation of her name, “I hear the cries of the world.” Then you might begin to feel the compassion that Kwan Yin symbolizes.

On the other end of the spectrum, maybe you are seeing a therapist for issues of low self esteem. A Cognitive Behavioral Therapist might direct you to do something similar: You could imagine

yourself as being liked by your friends, and repeat the phrase to yourself, “I am loved by my friends.” You could then notice the pleasant physical sensations that this situation triggers. The more you did this visualization technique, the more your brain would learn to associate that pleasant feeling with having friends around. Eventually you entrain your body to feel good just from thinking about your friends, and ultimately that translates into real feelings of being loved when in the presence of your friends.

The lovingkindness practice we did last week, as well as intercessory prayer fall into this framework. If you are praying for healing for someone, you might imagine the person being healthy, or you might imagine an angel touching them, while reciting words in your mind that support this image. If you were now to pay attention to the physical sensations in your body, you might find a rising of confidence that motivates you to continue praying. If you remove the supernatural element and simply imagine a friend being healthy, repeating, “may you be healthy” and feeling the sensations of good intentions, then you are doing the same thing without the religious trappings. Now does this practice actually result in objective physical healing? That is not something I am qualified to answer. I could see that there may be some sort of energetic interaction, especially given the connectedness between all living beings. But what I *can* say with confidence is that using this sort of Nurture Positive technique will have a beneficial effect on *you*, which is likely to result in subtle changes in your behavior that benefit others. Perhaps you decide to phone your sick friend, and your call comforts them. Perhaps the knowledge that you spent time “sending them healing energy” has a psychologically triggered benefit for their health. In the longer term, repeated practice of this sort will build your emotional sensitivity and general compassion, which will increasingly benefit those around you.

When doing Nurture Positive techniques, it is not necessary to incorporate all three focus spaces. For example, you could just use HEAR IN, repeating a word or phrase over and over. This is the foundation of Positive Affirmation techniques and mantra practice. Or if you are unable to contact any pleasant physical sensations when doing a healing-another style, you might just stick with the image and words wishing for their health. Some people are able to simply create the pleasant physical sensations of joy or love, in which case just focussing on that is enough to improve one’s mood. The increasingly popular Laughing Meditation works along the same lines.

The good news about Nurturing Positive is that it is infinitely scalable and adaptable. You can make up a technique to address any situation. However, some people find it challenging at first figuring out which focus spaces to use and how. So let’s take some examples. Say you wanted to calm down

after an argument. What might you imagine and say to yourself to do this? (maybe, imagining being calm, “I’m not angry/I am at peace”). Say you wanted to cut down on your chocolate intake? (imagine eating one square and enjoying it, “I pay attention and enjoy this chocolate/this piece is sufficient”) etc.

Of course, it isn’t necessary to make up a new technique every time you want to Nurture Positive. You can choose one way of practicing that works for you and do that all the time. For example, last week’s Loving Kindness meditation is a very commonly practiced technique. Positive Affirmations are also popular. In a moment I’ll guide you through choosing and using a technique. Don’t get overwhelmed by having to make decisions. Just choose something simple and stick with it until you feel like you want to branch out and experiment.

Nurturing Positive is an essential part of your practice. The eagle needs both wings to fly. Practicing both the inward, observational practices and the outward-looking Nurturing Positive practices will help you soar.