

The RAIN of Self-Compassion

A Simple Practice for Clients and Clinicians

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In *The Song of the Bird*, Anthony de Mello (de Mello, 1984), a well-known Jesuit priest, writer, and sage, described a key moment of his waking up—a moment of what I call *radical acceptance*. He said that he had spent decades being depressed, anxious, and selfish—despairing about how to change. The worst part, he said, was that even his friends had told him that he needed to become less self-absorbed. Then, one day his world stopped when a friend said, “Don’t change. Please don’t change. I love you just the way you are.” *Don’t change. I love you just as you are.* Father de Mello said the words were pure grace; they flooded through him. He said that, paradoxically, it was only when he got permission *not* to change—to be as he was—that he was able to transform in a profound way.

To me, this story describes one of the deep principles of healing and transformation: it’s only when we stop the war—stop the accusations toward ourselves about how bad and wrong we are—that we are actually free to flower and become all that we can be. Father de Mello was fortunate that he had a friend to help him. Many of us have friends who are mirrors in a positive way but, ultimately, to really move forward on our path we need to be able to regard ourselves with deep love and acceptance to open the door to change. To cultivate this ability in myself and my clients, I have developed a practice that I teach using the acronym RAIN. I find the R-A-I-N practice to be a powerful way to deepen self-compassion. It is a simple practice that has been really helpful to many of those that I work with (Brach, 2004).

The Trance of Unworthiness and Our Negativity Bias

Before I explore the RAIN of self-compassion, some context may be needed. I have written and spoken about the suffering of self-aversion and the need for self-compassion perhaps more than any other single theme and I come back to it again and again because self-aversion is such a pervasive form of suffering. It also happens to be one I am personally familiar with—while the frequency has decreased, the self-critic continues to appear in my mind. When I recognize it, I acknowledge what’s happening, “Oh, I’m back at war with myself again,” followed by, “Ok, this is the time to offer some kindness inwardly.” In my own life and work,

I have found, over and over, that self-compassion is essential for healing. Perhaps that's because I've noticed self-aversion at work even when other emotions seem to be predominant. While it might feel like I'm stuck in anger, fear, or blame, deep down there's a sense that *something's wrong with me*.

If we look closely at our minds when we're distressed, whatever the difficult emotion is, we find not just that emotion—not just the fear or the jealousy—but something deeper. That something deeper is an underlying belief—*I'm bad for having this feeling. This feeling reflects badly on me*. There's an unconscious leap from *I feel bad* to *I am bad*. In the Buddhist tradition, this is described as *second arrowing*. The first arrow is the feeling of fear (or whatever emotion is arising); the second arrow is the experience of being bad for having the feeling. Rather than bringing healing energy to the fear, we all too often lock into what I call the *trance of unworthiness* and condemn ourselves and the feeling as bad or wrong. When I talk about that trance, I'm talking about a narrow, distorted state of mind that impacts all our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

I once received an email from a woman who wrote, "Dear Tara, my twelve-year-old niece is quick to worry and often gets wound up with anxiety. After one such experience, she and I left to run some errands and she started apologizing in the car and told me how bad she feels about herself for having panic attacks." This woman understood that her niece's self-judgment was the second arrow and how that is what perpetuates the trance of unworthiness. I suggested that she teach her niece to recognize the second arrow and, when it arises, to instead bring a gentle attention to the inflow/outflow of her breath. I also talked about the phrase *real but not true*—that while her niece's judgments felt real, their content was not truth. She could learn not to believe these stories. I heard back that, after sharing this with her niece, she got this response: "The second arrow of self-judgment can be really difficult . . . but then there is the third arrow—when you realize that what you're worried about isn't even true!" These stories resonate because we all have experiences of personal deficiency and badness, and because the conviction we have of being bad is usually the most stubborn of our beliefs. In my experience, such beliefs are typically the hardest for us to wake up from.

Of course we are all familiar with what seems like the converse, when someone says, "You may feel less than, but I usually go around feeling special and better than other people." We humans tend to be emotionally bulimic. We either feel like we're the worst or we feel superior and self-important. We go back and forth between extremes. Underneath the sense of specialness there is, invariably, a hollow feeling—some feeling of separateness. Despite the bravado, our sense of superiority is predictably fragile and, deep down underneath it, there is a suppressed vulnerability.

So despite different surface appearances, the trance of unworthiness—of feeling deficient and unlovable—is one of the most common and pervasive forms of trance we fall into. What we're often not aware of is how many moments of our lives are distorted by an undercurrent of *not enough* or *should be more* or *something's wrong with me*. In the grip of this undercurrent, we have a sense that there's a problem and we see that problem as ourselves. In fact, like fish unaware of being in

water, most of us are so familiar with that sense of insufficiency that we don't realize that we're living and breathing in a toxic cocktail of *not being okay*.

Many people wonder, and many clients and students ask me, "Why is this insecurity about self so pervasive?" And of course I've asked myself the same question: "Why do so many of us, deep down, feel we're not okay?" We can certainly see this insecurity as a mirror of the larger culture we live in. There is so much striving, competition, bias, and fear that, for most of us, rather than living with an assumption of belonging, we are convinced that we have to meet certain unrealistic standards in order to be acceptable or lovable. Such standards are implicit in the messages regularly conveyed to us by our culture beginning in early childhood. Our culture, and all too often our families, tell us that we have to think, feel, behave, and look a certain way in order to be accepted or to get the approval we need to develop in a healthy way. We learn to conform as a way of gaining a positive response from others, which may work in the short run but, ultimately, undermines real confidence. Of course, the standards in any society are set by the dominant culture. So, if we don't belong to the dominant culture or if we don't want to live in the dominant way, or if we simply can't meet those standards, there are even more hurdles. For instance, if we are a person of color rather than white, we receive ongoing messages that, due to our race, we are "less than," and a likely target of hostility and violence. If we don't fit into the dominant culture in terms of religion—right now, for instance, by being Muslim—we get the message that we're perceived as dangerous, and not welcome in many places. Each additional hurdle to acceptance and belonging deepens the trance of insecurity and unworthiness (Powell, 2015).

The trance of unworthiness is sustained and amplified by our ingrained negativity bias—a deeply conditioned tendency to remember and dwell on the things we feel are wrong. This negativity bias is a part of an instinctive survival mechanism and there is a growing body of research that shows how our minds and brains are preset to recall and focus on what is or could be wrong (Hanson, 2013). Through most of our evolution, we were likely, at some point, to have predators, like the lion, stalking us. Given that, it was highly adaptive to remain vigilant that something might go wrong at any moment. In modern life, while some of us continue to be threatened by physical violation, many others are stalked by our own psychological fears rather than any sort of clear and present danger to our lives. Nonetheless, this survival bias persists and disposes us to fixate on whatever might be problematic. And usually, that means our own weaknesses and mistakes. Though we tell ourselves that this is rational to ensure that we don't repeat our mistake or that we improve ourselves, the hyper-vigilance just makes us more anxious and prone to make other mistakes. In short, this bias locks us in—it draws us into the trance.

I have a memory from when I was six or seven years old that highlights how our mind narrows when we fear mistakes. My parents had taken me to a restaurant and the waiter chatted to me, saying something like, "Well you look like a smart young lady. I have a question for you. What color was George Washington's white horse?" My brow furrowed and I really started trying to figure the riddle out. In my

mind, I turned over everything I remembered from any of the stories I'd ever heard about George as I tried to remember if I'd seen pictures of the first president on his horse. I finally made my best guess that the horse was black. When the waiter exposed my mistake, I was flooded with embarrassment and shame. True story. That was one lived experience in which insecurity led to error and set in motion more embarrassment, more fear of failure, more vigilance. It's as if the mind and brain make a contract with themselves, saying, "Let's remember this, so we don't ever do it again!" And here I am, many decades later, still remembering.

Of course, I'm not unique. We can all look back and find memories like this that jump out to us. A physician I know described a humiliating experience during his training. As a young, newly graduated MD doing his residency in obstetrics, he would become deeply embarrassed while performing pelvic exams on his female patients. To further his embarrassment, he had unconsciously formed a habit of whistling softly while performing them. During one such exam on a middle-aged patient, the woman suddenly burst out laughing, further embarrassing him. He looked up from his work and sheepishly said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Was I tickling you?" She had tears running down her cheeks from laughing so hard. "No, doctor, but the song you were whistling was 'I wish I were an Oscar Mayer Wiener!'"

While this is a funny story, the reality is that when we are insecure about ourselves, we are not operating in full awareness. We're in a trance—our attention is narrowed and we're driven by the beliefs and feelings that something's wrong with us. And then we add the second arrow (and third and fourth) that we should not have these beliefs and feelings, or be driven by them. This proliferation of arrowing keeps fueling the trance of unworthiness.

Three Core Dynamics that Perpetuate the Trance of Unworthiness

When we encounter the trance of unworthiness, what we most need is to catch ourselves and open our eyes so that we can consider what is really happening. For instance, when you're defensive with a colleague or too harsh in parenting, or when you find you're drinking too much or you are insensitive to your partner's needs, you might very well turn on yourself and accuse yourself of being a bad person. The only way to wake up out of such a trance is to shine the light of awareness on it. In my experience, there are three key dynamics that arise in moments like this, when we're at war with ourselves. The first is that *we're taking it personally*. The belief is: *What's going on is my fault. I'm bad.*

Self-blame overlooks all the past causes and conditions that we had no control over that may have contributed to the problem. Causes and conditions might include intergenerational trauma—the epigenetic traces that pass down memories of violence—as well as the influence of our family and culture that shape our development in this lifetime.

Recent research shows that if someone grows up in a situation with a lot of violence, it literally changes their biochemistry so that they get locked into stress mode—where there's a feeling of impending danger and a potential for violent

reactivity. Beyond overt trauma, there are many degrees of severed belonging that we all experience when we don't receive the kind of nurturing we need. What happens when we look at our early years and ask, "Did my parents really listen, and understand, and get who I was? Was I given the kind of mirroring that helped me trust myself and trust my core goodness? Did I feel a sense of trust that I belong and am acceptable, lovable, and worthwhile?" If we were able to view this wisely, we might realize, *I get it that I was often judged and criticized, and I've internalized this as self-aversion, which leads to defensive or aggressive behaviors that protect me from feeling worse about myself.* Then when those unwanted behaviors arise, we wouldn't take it so personally as "my fault." Remembering the chain of conditioning, we wouldn't add the second arrow of, "I'm a bad person for being so judgmental."

Recognizing the multitude of causes for our behavior doesn't mean we are not responsible for our actions, it just means we are not condemning ourselves as *bad*, and directing aversive blame at ourselves. This is a vitally important distinction. I frequently encounter people who admit that they're afraid of easing up on themselves. "If I don't blame myself," we often think, "I won't be taking responsibility." We are not able to respond with wisdom and compassion if we are struck by that second arrow of self-blame. The fact of the matter is that releasing aversive self-blame is the necessary precursor to taking authentic responsibility and being more intelligent and creative with our solutions.

Typically, we do take it personally, and in a similar way we are hooked into judging others. Our nervous system picks up other people's insecurities, and we react to them just as we do to our own feelings of inadequacy—with judgments and aversion that are trying to change or make up for what we don't like (Siegel, 2015). Then we add on more self-blame for those judgments and behaviors towards others. In other words, the first dynamic in the trance of unworthiness is to forget the causes and conditions and target ourselves and others with aversive blame.

The second thing that happens when we're in the trance of unworthiness is that, because our attention is narrowed and tightened, *we lose touch with key dimensions of our authentic being* and with the actual vulnerability that is current in us—our feelings of hurt, woundedness, sorrow, or fear. This makes it much more likely that we'll aggressively turn against ourselves, since we're not actually registering the simple truth, *Oh, I am suffering. This is hard. This hurts.* We are cut off from both the rawness of our vulnerability, and the natural compassion that arises when we touch that rawness. If we can't touch the vulnerability, we can't feel compassion. In addition, the negative fixation of trance creates blinders that keep us from being aware of our goodness. We forget how much we long to be honest and to see what is true. We forget how much we really want to love, and not to hold back our love. We forget the light of awareness that shines through us, the goodness of our being. We have lost touch with the wholeness of our being, with our heart awareness. This is the crux of the second characteristic of trance—forgetting the truth of who we are.

The third dynamic when we are caught in the trance of unworthiness is that *we are propelled into reactive behavior in a misguided attempt to cope and feel better.* We react automatically with an unconscious defense or adaptation designed to lessen the sting of our shame, guilt, or fear. These reactive behaviors sustain the

trance because they create psychological and behavioral tendencies that only reinforce the entire experience of distress and trauma. Trance begets behaviors that draw us more deeply into trance, in a seemingly endless cycle.

The three dynamics operant during the trance of unworthiness lock us into an identification as a deficient person. Consider instances when you're feeling insecure or bad about yourself. How do you habitually cope? What are the behaviors that get triggered? One habit some of us fall into is sustaining an inner dialogue that seeks to self-justify and convince ourselves that we are okay. The flip side of this inner dialogue may be to blame other people for how we are feeling or reacting badly. We may then start working to compensate for our negativity or try too hard to please others in order to prove that we're worthwhile in spite of it. Add to that our attempts to self-soothe with many addictive behaviors like overeating, immoderate drinking or drug use, and gambling. Whatever reactive habits we fall into to try to feel better about ourselves, we end up solidifying the identity of the *not-okay-self*, and actually intensifying the hurt rather than relieving it. Finally, we often add insult to injury by blaming ourselves not just for feeling bad, but for our defensive efforts to cope—*I'm bad for the ways I'm trying to feel better*. In other words, we feel ashamed of our trance and then shame ourselves for our trance behaviors. So, these three parts of the trance of unworthiness—taking it personally, not seeing our vulnerability and goodness, and then reacting out of shame—consolidate an identity as a *not-okay-person*.

RAIN: Dissolving the Trance with Self-Compassion

Awakening out of our deep sense of unworthiness begins when we start to see that we're living in a trance, and recognize how this is keeping us from living and loving fully. This motivates us to find a path of healing and homecoming. To bring a quality of healing presence to the suffering of unworthiness, I use a practice based on the acronym RAIN:

- Recognize what is going on.
- Allow the experience to be there, just as it is.
- Investigate with interest and care.
- Nourish with self-compassion.

First, we *recognize* that we're in a trance. We might notice that we're judging ourselves—that's the big one. Usually, there's that voice of the inner critic going on. We also might notice that we're justifying ourselves. We are rehearsing what we're going to say to somebody else. We might know that we're overeating or overdrinking. We might notice that we're speeding up or worrying.

There may be many different aspects of our trance but, in recognizing them, we prepare for the second step—to *allow* what is happening to be just as it is. We can stop and say, "Okay, in some way I'm not feeling good about myself." Recognize it and allow it. We can let the unpleasant feeling be there, which gives us a pause—a chance to deepen our attention in a healing way.

The “I” in RAIN refers to the next step in the practice, which is to *investigate* what is happening. It’s important to investigate our feelings and state of mind with curiosity and gentleness. We begin by asking: *What’s really going on inside me right now? What am I believing? What feeling is most asking for attention?* We investigate further by discovering what the felt sense of our experience is like and where we are feeling it. We might ask: *How does this vulnerable place want me to be with it? or, What does this part of me most need?* In this way, we sense into what might most comfort or heal—be it love, compassion, understanding, or forgiveness.

The final step in the practice, the “N” of RAIN, is to *nourish* ourselves with compassion. Perhaps we offer words to ourselves like: “It’s okay, sweetheart” or “I’m sorry,” or “I love you.” Thich Nhat Hanh uses the beautiful and powerful phrase, “Darling, I care about this suffering” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2014). Or it might be that you sense the love of God or the Divine flowing through you, bathing the parts of you that feel most vulnerable. Some may visualize themselves as a mature parent attuning to and caring for the part of themselves that feels like a terrified child, gently placing a hand on their heart as a way of communicating care. Whatever it is, we sense the possibility of calling on love (from our own awake heart, or from a source perceived as beyond) and offering it inward. That’s how we *nourish* with self-compassion.

Just like with a real rain, where fresh life flourishes in the aftermath, the moments after practicing RAIN are an essential part of our healing and awakening. After applying the practice, we simply rest and notice, *Okay, what’s it like right now?* What we often discover is that the moment when we began the practice of RAIN, we were in the trance of unworthiness and identified with a small self that felt separate and deficient. In contrast, after applying the practice of RAIN—after we’ve recognized and allowed our feelings of vulnerability, and investigated and nourished them with compassion—we open to a sense of who we are beyond the trance. At that point, we can rest in that beingness—savoring our natural spaciousness, wakefulness, and tenderness.

The RAIN of Self-Compassion: The Minister’s Story

Here is an example of how the RAIN of self-compassion works. I was working with a minister who had reached an impasse in his marriage which left his wife really dissatisfied. She wanted him to be more intimate, more vulnerable, more real with his feelings, and not so spiritually detached. She wanted him to feel more connected, to look in her eyes and say, “I love you,” and let her know, “I feel scared.” The more she asked for this, the more he felt blocked, pressured, and even offended. As we began working together, he started to get in touch with those moments in which he felt this way. Soon, we began to discover that, in those moments when there were opportunities to connect, he felt a real sense of deficiency and was visited by a harsh inner critic who said, “You’re a hypocrite.” In other words, this voice was saying to him, “You’re preaching love but you don’t embody it. You can comfort and guide as a spiritual adviser and you’re fine with people as long as you’re in the role of the minister, but as soon as you’re

the one hurting you can't be close. You know all your life you've never been close to anybody." Naturally, this self-criticism was accompanied by a great deal of shame.

His practice with RAIN was to recognize when those thoughts and feelings would arise and pause, allowing them to be there. We did this together as he recollected a recent, very shame-filled incident of not being able to engage authentically with his wife. I asked him, "What does that shame feel like, and where is it in your body?" He replied, "It feels like a sinking hollow ache, and I can feel it in my heart and in my belly." And he continued, "Then I'm gripped by the belief that I'm an impostor, I'm defective, and people will find out." Though he was clearly a sincere and caring man, he was terrified that his wife would find out how he really felt and dismiss him as defective. When I asked him, "What does that hollow shame place most need?" he responded with conviction, "It needs forgiveness, it needs love, it needs somebody . . . a presence that sees my goodness."

As mentioned earlier, when we nourish, we want in some way to bring love and compassion to our place of suffering. At this point, in my own practice of RAIN, I often put my hands on my heart because I have found—as have many others—that touch really makes a difference. Current research seems to be supporting the healing potential of touch (Field, 2014). There's a whole neural nexus in the area we touch when we put our hands on our heart, and this simple gesture helps bring the warmth of human contact to these nerves, possibly activating the parasympathetic nervous system—which calms and soothes the "fight-flight" response of the sympathetic nervous system. Nourishing often happens through some combination of touch, words and messages, imagery, and energy.

For my client, the minister, nourishing involved the sense of calling on God's love, as well as on his own love, placing his hands on his heart, and sending all that love to his wounded places. He described trying to let that love pour into his chest, and into his belly. He shared with me that it helped him to say, "It's okay, you can surrender into love. It's okay, surrender."

In the moments after offering these compassionate words and gestures to himself, when he paused to observe the effects of the RAIN practice, he reported feeling a sense of spaciousness and that he felt one with a vast field of vibrating, loving awareness. Naturally, this was not a one-time experience, as our conditioning is deeply wired and it takes many rounds of RAIN to uproot the old patterning. For this minister, the old feelings and beliefs kept coming back. But after many rounds of bringing his hands to his heart, calling on God's love and his own love, and pouring it inwards to heal his hurt, he began to connect more regularly to an enlarged sense of his own being. And importantly, this enabled a growing sense of trust in his own inherent goodness. Months after we began working with RAIN, he shared with me that, for the first time in twenty-six years, he and his wife were feeling each other's hearts. I believe this profound shift and opening came from his repeated practice of self-compassion.

For this minister, the trance was actually a kind of inner stoniness around his heart, where he played his role but was armored against fear of exposure. By practicing RAIN, he gradually dissolved that stoniness, and in its place was a space

of loving openness that gradually transformed his relationship with everyone in his life.

My Own Experience of the Nourishing RAIN of Self-Compassion

The most challenging experiences for most of us are when self-doubt and shame solidify at our core. It's not only a *belief* of personal badness, but it's visceral. So often when we try to offer compassion towards ourselves, there is a sense that there's really no one home to offer it. It's almost like we're too regressed, too tight, or too small to offer ourselves real compassion. So I want to reiterate that, in the RAIN of self-compassion—in recognizing, allowing, investigating, and then nourishing—it's vital to draw that sense of loving presence from whatever source we can—whatever is closest and most accessible. It doesn't have to be Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or Jewish—just personal and authentic (Brach, 2016). Ultimately, that love is our very nature but, because our hearts are constricted and contracted and alienated, we often don't feel that it's present or available. By reaching out and touching some expression of love, we reconnect with the loving that flows through our own being.

The RAIN of self-compassion is a practice like any other. We have to do it repeatedly because our conditioning to regard ourselves as a deficient self is so strong. Even if we can only go through the motions, I have found this practice to be extremely healing and effective. As we've heard, *neurons that fire together wire together*. We need to de-condition our sense of unworthiness and badness, over and over, by *recognizing, allowing, investigating, and nourishing with compassion*. Each time we do RAIN and then pause, the true flourishing and flowering happens. In the rest after RAIN, we can inquire, *Who am I, when meeting this moment with an allowing and caring presence?* It is in these moments that we begin to realize and trust the depth and beauty of what we are.